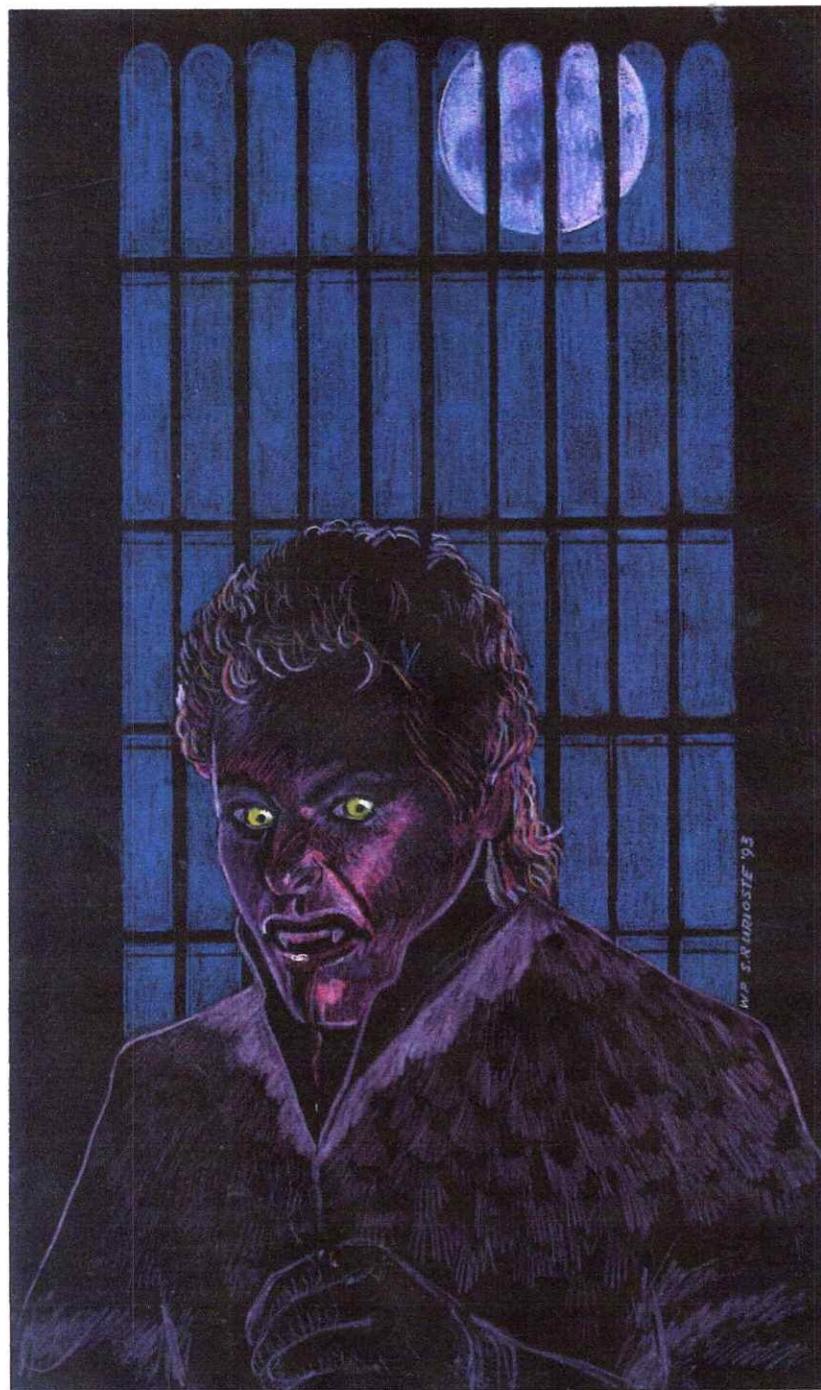
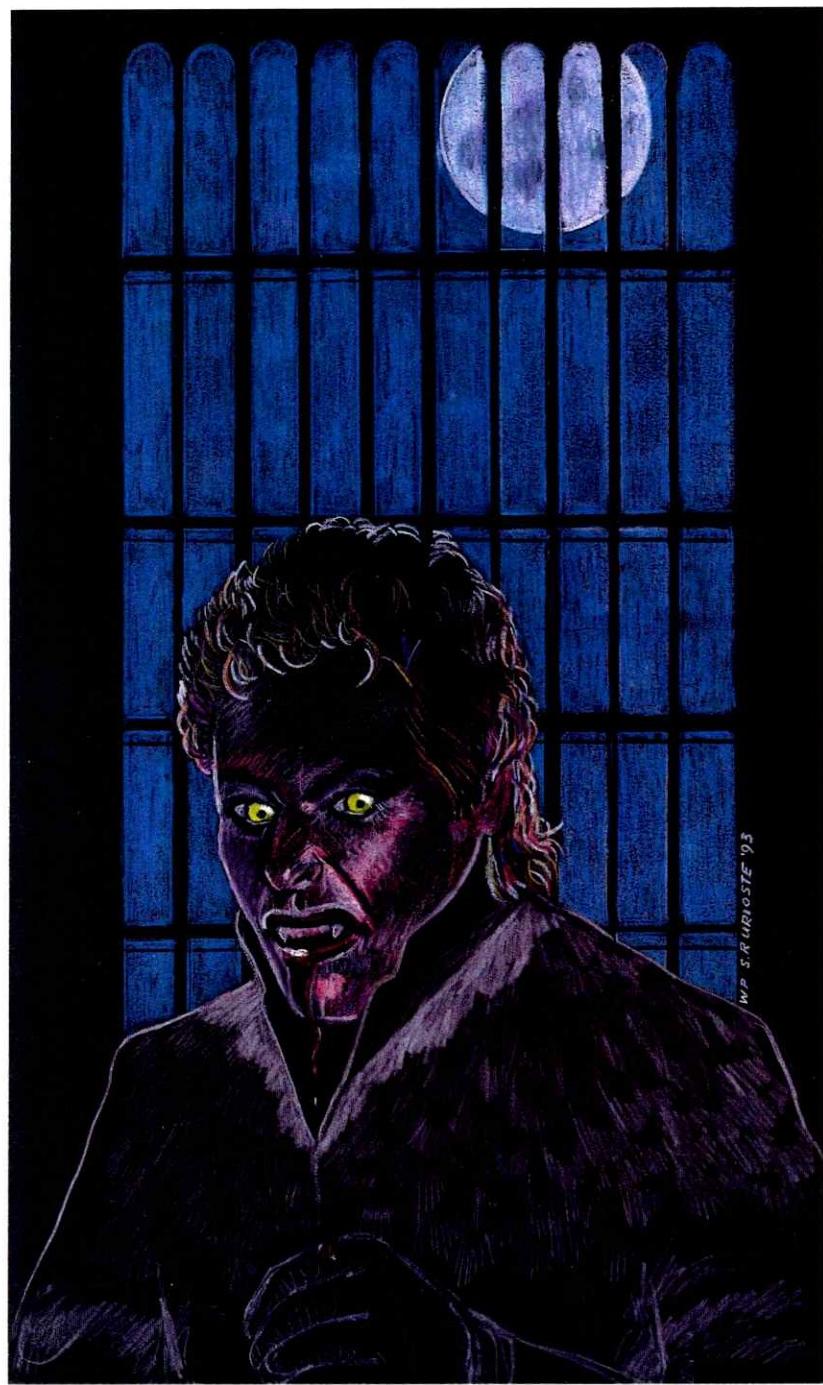


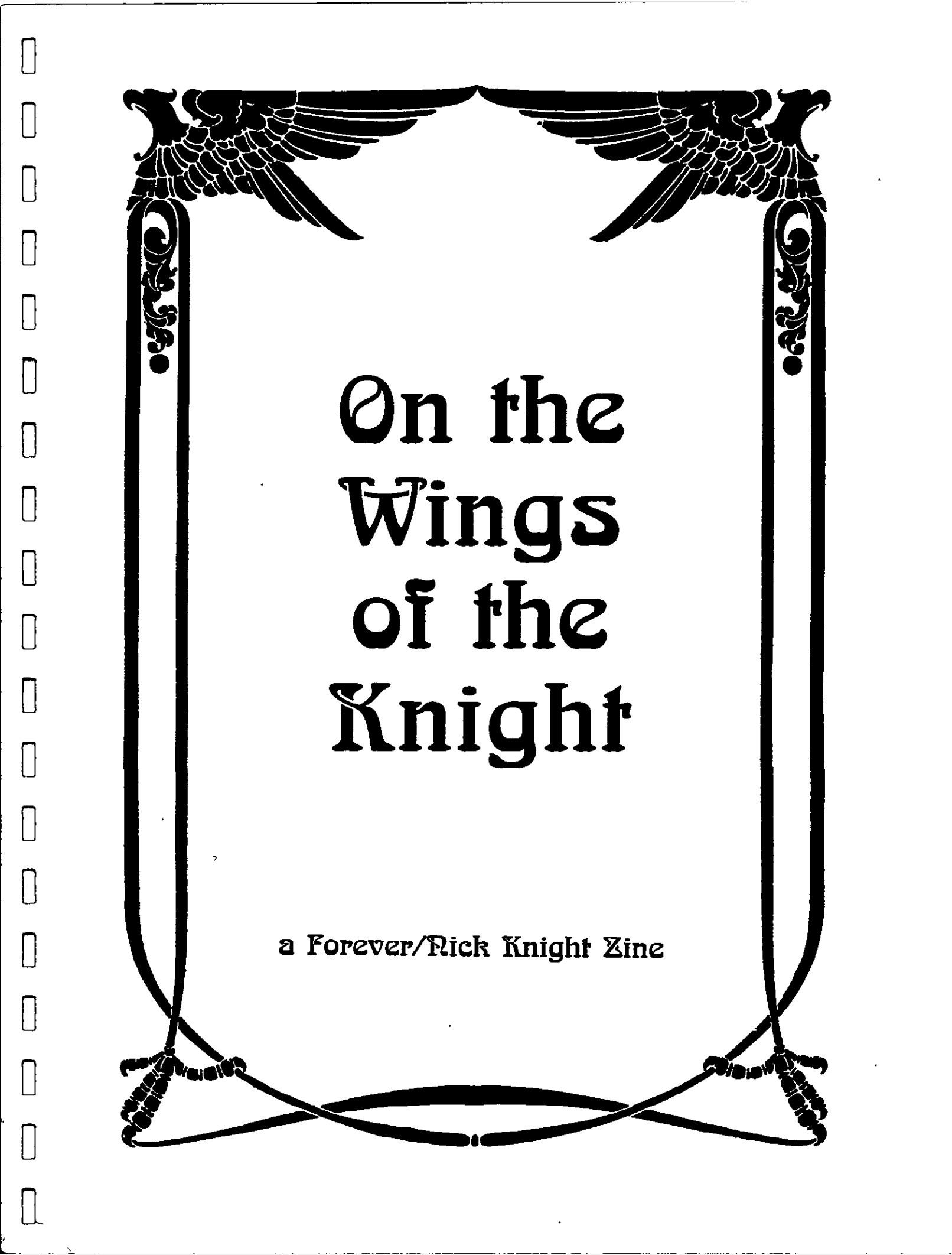
On the Wings



of the Knight

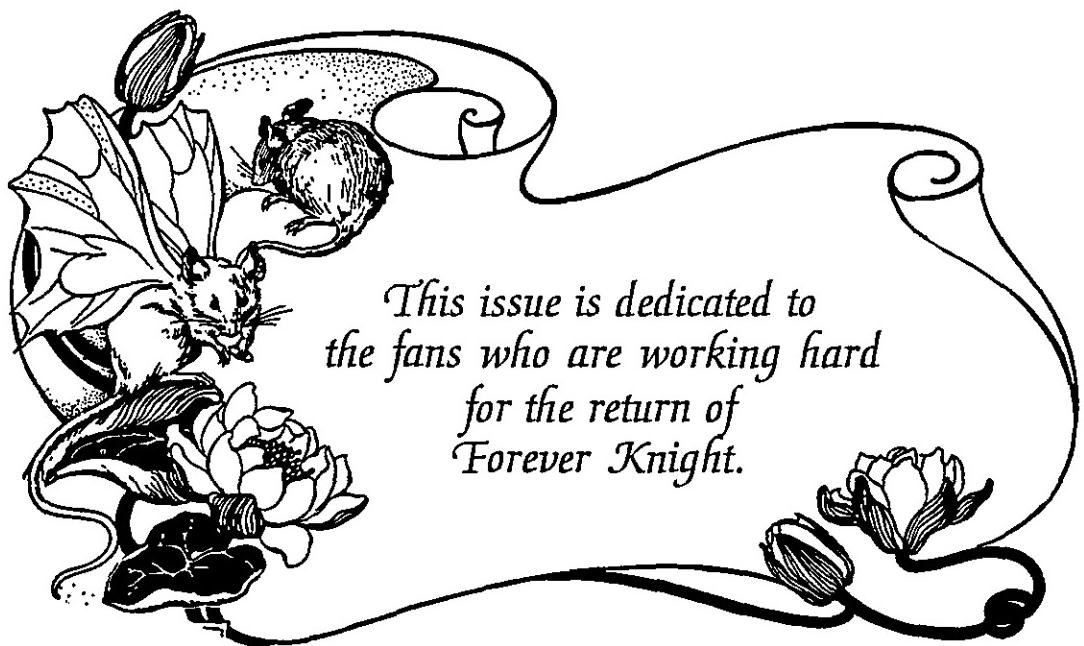






On the Wings of the Knight

a Forever/Rick Knight Zine



*This issue is dedicated to
the fans who are working hard
for the return of
Forever Knight.*

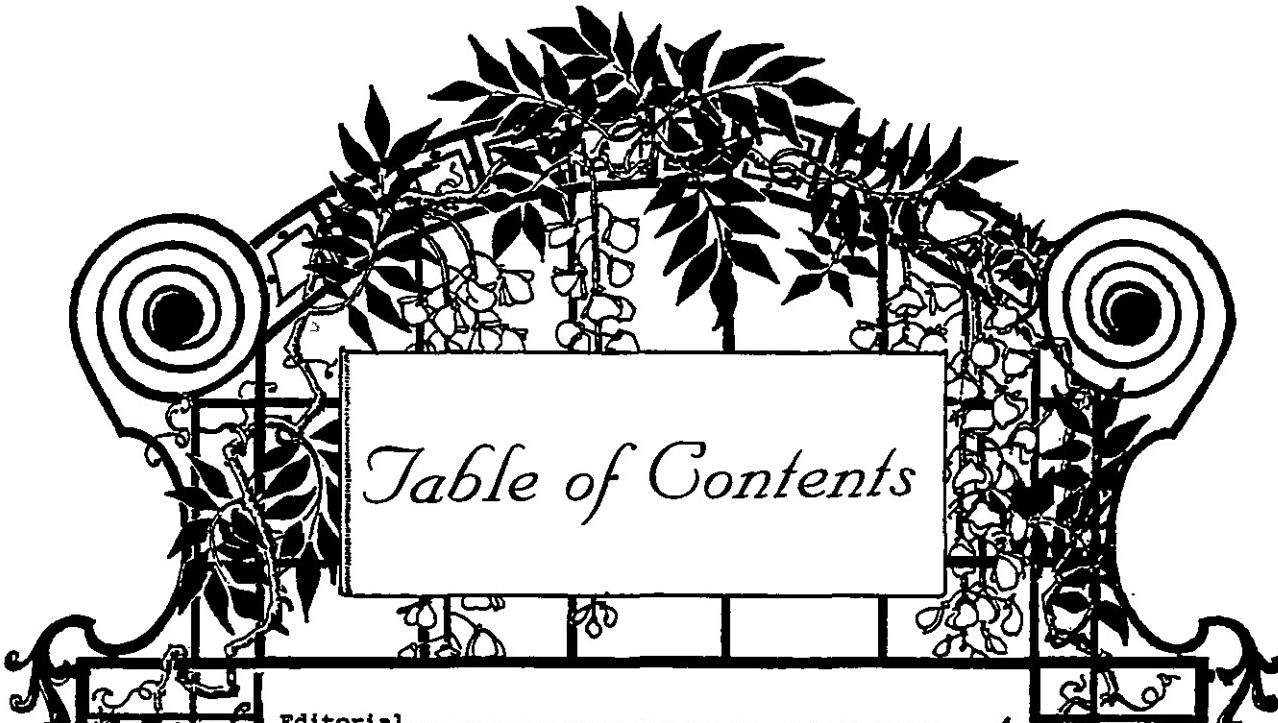


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Typed by Ann Hupe, Bill Hupe, and Chris Logsdon
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Greetings to the first issue of *On the Wings of the Knight*.

If you talk to any vampire fan, there's always been plenty of vampire movies, but seldom any television shows. *Dark Shadows* is probably the most successful in terms of its long-running, but the vampire theme soon lost its position as centerpiece in the series. And for those of you who remember the ol' *Cliffhangers* series that only lasted one season, there was a twenty-minute vampire serial.

In other words, television shows about vampires are an endangered species and do not last long once on the tube.

When I saw the original pilot, I was very impressed with *Nick Night* as an original idea for a television show. I even taped it on two-hour mode. I was even more pleased when it eventually resurrected as *Forever Knight*, thus satisfying my need for a decent vampire show. But just as my appetite was hardly whetted, it's canceled (but hopefully not for long!). I guess it takes a certain amount of sophistication to appreciate a show like *Forever Knight*, and in hopes of preserving its legacy, *On the Wings of the Knight* was born, one of many *Forever Knight* zines that will be published by us and other publishers. Perhaps we will be able to bring *Forever Knight* back on air in the future, but if not, I know we can still enjoy the continued adventures of the reluctant vampire who is trying to atone for sins he's committed in the past with hopes of redeeming himself in the future.

Issue #1 not only contains several short stories, but some excellent poetry, some in French for the more adventurous and linguistically gifted. #2 will be out within a year, and I've been promised very juicy stories, including two novellas, by authors who couldn't meet #1's deadline. It'll probably be at least twice as thick and twice as exciting.

I'd like to thank the artists, M. West and S. R. Urioste, for jumping in feet first as they did. Though there are many writers of *FK*, there are very few artists available. If you're an artist that would like to join us in issue 2, let me know!

Blood Moon Rising

Pat Dunn
Valerie Meachum
Diana Smith

ANOTHER VAMPIRE KILLER STALKS THE CITY!

The tabloid headline screamed at the two men sitting across the desk from Joe Stonetree. The apparently older one of the pair gingerly pulled the newspaper closer and cringed at the condemning photo dominating the front page.

"Gee, Captain, I can explain--"

"I hope so, Schanke, because you're about this far from Traffic," Stonetree said, glaring at the senior detective. "Just how did your picture happen to get on the front page of the largest selling rag in Canada?"

"Cut him some slack, Captain," Nick Knight ventured on his partner's behalf.

"Some what, Detective?" Stonetree turned his thundercloud face on the blond man. "As if we don't have enough to deal with on this case, you two can't even keep the tabloid vultures off your backs!" He yanked the paper from the desk with a suddenness that made both detectives wince, and slammed it into the wastebasket. "I don't suppose you found anything at the scene -- besides a photo opportunity, that is?"

"Not really," Nick admitted, looking away from the captain. "No weapon, no signs of a struggle."

"Same M.O.?"

Schanke sighed. "Looks that way, according to Natalie."

"She said she could tell us more when the autopsy was done," Knight added. "Which it should be by now, so maybe we ought to check in with her, and..."

If possible, Stonetree's glare deepened at the rather obvious escape tactic. "Okay, Knight, you do that. I'm glad to hear somebody around here is

making progress on the case!"

"Maybe," Schanke muttered as they left the captain's office. "Last time I checked, though, she was spinning her wheels just like the rest of us."

Nick doubted that, but he kept his peace, only frowning at his partner as they headed out of the precinct house. Unfortunately, he suspected that Natalie's "wheel-spinning" was deliberate. She'd seen wounds like those on the throats of the three victims once before, and he knew what she had thought then. But it wasn't LaCroix this time. He wasn't certain if that was reassuring or not.

* * * * *

"I'm tellin' ya, Jack, it has all the classic earmarks of a vampire. Look at that bite mark," Edgar Benedek said, jabbing a finger at a photo. "That's one heck of a hickey, Buds. And the body a good quart low but no blood on the scene." He propped his Nike'd feet on the end of Jonathan's bed, and the anthropology professor gave them a shove.

"There are no such things as vampires, Benedek," Jonathan MacKensie retorted in his precise British manner. "How many times do I have to say it?" He peered at Benny over the reading glasses perched on his nose.

"Dr. M says there are--"

"Dr. Moorehouse is as -- gullible as you are," Jonathan said, carefully changing his original thought. He rubbed a hand across his brown eyes and flopped back on one of the twin beds in their motel room.

"Hey, Jon-Boy, relaxavision," Benny said cheerfully, shuffling through the piles of photos and papers scattered across the tabletop. "My contacts are doing a lot of the legwork, but I think we ought to interview the cops ourselves."

"Benedek--"

"This one in the paper would be a good place to start," Benny continued, ignoring his reluctant partner. "I can find out who he is by morning, and we can hit him up for the scoop."

"Benedek, do you honestly think he will be in any mood to chat with us? He has important work to do!"

Benny held his chest, mortally wounded by the strait-laced professor's words. "And we don't? C'mon, Jack, this is our big chance! Vampires, fer cryin' out loud! Donahue's gonna eat it up, I'm tellin' ya."

"Donahue?" Jonathan repeated dubiously.

Grinning broadly, ingenuously, the erstwhile tabloid journalist answered, "Did I say Donahue? Nah, you musta heard wrong. Moorhouse is gonna eat it up."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

* * * * *

"...but I really can't say any more than that," Natalie Lambert shrugged. "Whoever it is, they're really good at covering their tracks."

Yawning cavernously, Schanke assured her, "You're not alone in that observation."

"How long have you been up, Schanke?" she asked him, her customary flippant manner making way for professional concern.

"Too damn long," the balding detective conceded. "So, if that's all she wrote, I think that's my cue. See you guys tomorrow."

As the door clicked shut behind his partner, Nick's smile faded. "What's the real word, Nat?"

She hesitated a moment before answering, "I went back and looked at my

notes on the museum guard, and everything looks the same."

Picking up on her tone of voice, Nick prompted, "But?"

"But I keep thinking I'm missing something, something that should be right in plain sight."

"Wishful thinking, maybe?" he suggested with a wry twist of his mouth. "If it is one of us, it won't be easy to deal with, but I need to know."

Natalie thought seriously before answering, "I don't think so, Nick. Something rings false, and I'm going to figure out what."

"Yeah, well, I'll rest a lot easier when you do." He perched on the corner of the desk, arms crossed, and watched her wheel the corpse into the cooler. "I thought I was being paranoid, so I didn't say anything before, but... each murder has been closer to 'The Raven.'"

"Your friend's nightclub?" She turned to him in surprise. "You don't think Janette...?"

"No, she's got more sense than that, and she insists that everyone else does too. But I don't like this pattern..."

"Well, it's definitely a pattern," Natalie agreed, stripping off her gloves. "Sounds like someone is purposely trying to lead the authorities to the local vampire hang-out."

Nick winced at the term, although it was a fairly accurate description of the nightclub-cum-singles bar owned and operated by the beautiful Frenchwoman. "Maybe I'd better drop by and have a talk with Janette about this, then."

"I'm surprised you haven't already," Natalie said, giving him a speculative look.

"Yeah, well, I've been busy," Nick said, levering himself up off the desk and turning toward the doorway. "Thanks, Nat. Good night."

"Night," she murmured, turning off the lamp on her desk.

* * * * *

"Ya know, Jack, according to this map, the vampire seems to like this particular neighborhood," Benny said, leaning over a spread-open map of Toronto. "Wonder what's the attraction? Better quality blood?"

Jonathan moaned and buried his handsome face in his pillow. "There are no vampires, Benedek--"

"I've met my share, Jacko," Benny assured him, gathering up the map.

"Where are you going?" Jonathan demanded, sitting upright.

"Chasing shadows," Benny said with an infectious grin on his sharp-featured face.

"It's after midnight!" Jonathan objected. "Can't this wait until morning?"

Benedek paused in the process of putting on his jacket. "No way, Dr. J -- vampires go undercover at daybreak. Didn't you read my book Vampire Life and Lore??"

"Must have missed that one," Jonathan muttered, as he threw back the bedcovers and stood up. "Well, I don't want you traipsing around by yourself unsupervised. Give me a few minutes to get dressed, and I'll go with you."

"That's the spirit, Jonny!" Benny exclaimed, slapping the professor on his pajamaed back.

Jonathan winced and went into the bathroom, pointedly closing the door.

* * * * *

Nick Knight paused and surveyed the crowded interior of *The Raven*, then made his way toward Janette's table.

"Any news?" she asked as he sat down, more anxious than she ever allowed

herself to be, at least openly.

Nick sighed, shrugging slightly. "Nat's sure it isn't one of us."

"But you aren't," she prompted him.

"I don't know what to think. And if it isn't, why do the killings seem to be leading here?"

Janette shuddered slightly. "I think I would rather she concluded it was one of us. I could solve that easily enough. But if some unknown mortal is trying to draw attention to us..."

"Then it's my problem," Nick finished for her. "Once we catch the guy, anything he says about vampires will only work against him -- so long as we keep the investigation out of here. But if he gets much closer--"

"Or she," Janette pointed out. "Isn't it your job not to make assumptions like that?"

Half-smiling in acknowledgment of this, he replied, "Yeah, it is. And don't worry, I'm not discounting any possibilities. I just said 'he' for convenience sake."

"Ah," she conceded, raising a delicate dark eyebrow. She sipped from the wineglass before her and set it down, fingering the stem. "All three of these victims were patrons of The Raven, Nick. The first two were casual attendees, but this last man was a regular. I don't like it."

"You don't seriously think that I do, Janette? I'm as worried as you--"

"I doubt that, cheri," she interrupted.

Nick frowned, then turned his head as a minor commotion made its way toward them.

"Ms duBois is busy, mister," the club bouncer was saying to a slight, dark-haired man as he dodged dancers and headed straight toward them. A tall sandy-haired man trailed him, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"What is it, Jacques?" Janette inquired.

The bouncer opened his mouth, but was prevented from saying anything as the smaller man interjected, "Benjamin Edgerton, Ms. duBois, I'm the night-life columnist for the Star -- this is Mac, my assistant," he jabbed a thumb at the taller man, "and I just wanted to get a few words from you for my review of this place. What'll ya say, ma'am?"

Fasting on a brilliant smile, Janette said, "I'm sorry, Mr. -- Edgerton, was it? I'm afraid we're getting rather near closing time, and I have some pressing business to attend to. Perhaps if you'd come back another evening, I'd be happy to--"

"Just a couple of minutes is all I need, Ms duBois," the interloper persisted. "Give me a nice, neat quote for my column, and I'm tellin' ya, my readers will really relate to that. Seeing a sleek-and-chic lady like yourself getting out there with the patrons and really concerned about how things--"

"Mr. Edgerton." Janette's patience was rapidly wearing thin, though Nick doubted that anyone unfamiliar with her would recognize the warning signs. "I'm pleased to hear that you approve of my management style, but because I do have responsibilities beyond mingling with my customers I really must ask you to catch me at a more opportune time, d'accord?"

"Benny, come on," said the nervously-acting man, "maybe this isn't a good time to do this--"

"That's what the lady just said," interjected Jacques meaningfully, glowering at the intruders.

"--so maybe we'll just come back tomorrow," babbled 'Mac', "in the morning...?"

Janette raised her hand. "No, I'm afraid that won't be convenient. I'm something of a -- late-riser -- the drawbacks of running a nightclub. We open at eight. You may see me at seven-thirty tomorrow evening, gentlemen."

"Let's go, Benny," 'Mac' said, pulling on the other man's arm and flashing Janette a rather charming smile. "We don't want to be a bother." He overrode Benny's protests as he hustled him out of the nightclub.

"He's... intriguing," Janette said thoughtfully and Nick gave her a surprised look. "Mac, not the other one," she clarified.

Out on the sidewalk, Jonathan dragged Benny to their rental car. "Next time you change my name, you might consult with me first," he said indignantly.

"There wasn't time, Jonny. Besides; I picked one you're probably used to," Benny said in self-defense.

"'Mac'?" I have never been called 'Mac'," Jonathan said with a shudder.

"Just goes to show it's never too late for anything," Benny said cheerfully, opening the driver's side car door.

Jonathan lifted his eyes heavenward, then yanked open the passenger side door. "Benedek, just why are you so interested in this place, anyway?"

"Playing a hunch, Jack, that's all." He started the engine, saying, "We'll follow it up when we talk to the queen of the Midnight Hour tomorrow evening. Meanwhile, I've got the name of that detective in the photo -- we'll tackle him bright and early in the morning."

"Bright and early?" Jonathan groaned. "Benedek, have you ever heard of a thing called 'sleep'?"

Glancing at his Edgar Cayce talking wristwatch, Benny answered brightly, "Yep, and we better go get some. Shake a leg, Dr. Jack, we've got a busy day tomorrow."

Jonathan opened his mouth, but he snapped it shut when Benny floored the accelerator and the car took off with a jerk, throwing its passenger back in his seat.

* * * * *

Nick Knight awoke to a message on his phone answering machine. "Nicolas," said Janette's voice, "I made inquiries of the newspaper Mr. Edgerton represented himself as working for, and they have never heard of him! Our meeting tonight should be most -- interesting. In the meantime, please do whatever it is you police people do to find out who our visitors last night really are. Thank you, cheri." The message tape spun into silence and the machine clicked off.

Nick sighed and shook his head, then padded barefoot toward the refrigerator.

* * * * *

When Nick walked into the precinct house an hour later, he was greeted by the sight of the fast-talking "Benjamin Edgerton" in conversation with Schanke. "Well, at least this'll make Janette's order pretty easy to fill," he muttered to himself. He strolled toward his desk, unobtrusively focusing his hearing on the pair's conversation. They were across the room, by the water fountain, and didn't notice Nick.

"...and that book of yours about the UFOs -- True Alien Encounters -- that one kept me up all night reading it!" Schanke enthused. "Your stuff's terrific, Mr. Benedek."

"Benny," the other man said automatically. "I'm real glad you like them, Detective, but could we get back to the case you're working on?"

To his credit, Schanke hesitated. "We're not supposed to discuss cases with members of the press."

Nick kept his gaze on his desk top, waiting for Benedek's reply.

"I'm not here as a member of the press," he said solemnly. "I'm with the Georgetown Institute's Department of Paranormal Investigations -- you've heard of my partner, Dr. Jonathan MacKensie--?"

Nick turned his head and eyed the two men.

Schanke frowned. "Didn't he win the Nobel Prize or something?"

Benedek shook his head. "Nah, that was his dad. But Jonny's good folks on his own account. We're respectable investigators."

"Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure," Schanke agreed. "But I really don't know if--"

"Schanke! Knight!" The captain's voice boomed across the squad room, temporarily halting every conversation. "In here! Now!"

The partners exchanged looks across the room, Nick knitting his brows in a wordless gesture, answered by Schanke's shrug. For his part, Benny grinned as if somehow vindicated and brazenly followed the detectives into Stonetree's office.

"Captain, I swear I haven't told him a thing," Schanke began, shoulder to shoulder with Nick as they stood before Stonetree's desk.

"Is that right?" the big man asked, leaning back in his chair and studying the suddenly nervous detectives.

"Scout's honor, Capt'n," Schanke said earnestly. "Tell him, Nick."

Nick raised his eyebrows but obliged his partner. "I believe him, Captain."

"He holds up to questioning real well, Captain Stonetree," Benedek put in helpfully, drawing the police captain's attention.

Before the latter could reply, the office door opened, admitting the man Nick had seen with Benedek at *The Raven*. He looked anxiously at each of the others, then said, "Sorry, but my stomach acts up every now and then--"

"Still queasy from dinner?" Benny whispered sympathetically.

Jonathan ignored him. "Er -- as I said, the mayor assured Dr. Moorhouse that we'd be able to work with your department on this case, Captain. But if it's a problem, we can--"

"Help," Benedek said quickly, elbowing his partner in the stomach and eliciting a groan. "We'll help track down this vampire--"

"If it is a vampire," Jonathan hissed.

Nick and Schanke exchanged glances and looked at Stonetree for an explanation.

"Dr. Jonathan MacKensie and Edgar Benedek are from the Georgetown Institute," the captain said heavily. "The mayor thinks we need their assistance on the -- current situation. You're going to cooperate fully." To the visitors, he said, "Nick Knight and Don Schanke are two of my best men. Ask them anything you want."

"Within reason," Nick muttered under his breath.

"Hey, that's great! Benedek is an expert on vampires," Schanke said, more enthusiastic now that he knew the captain's anger wasn't his fault.

"Schanke, didn't we go through this a while back?" Nick inquired as they left the office. "The victims aren't homeless this time, but do you seriously think the killer is any more a vampire than our friend Fenner?"

"You got any better ideas, Nick?" Schanke insisted. "And anyway, even Natalie has to admit Fenner didn't leave neat little pairs of punctures!"

Nick mentally counted to ten, then started over in Cantonese before he noticed Jonathan MacKensie -- or 'Mac', as he had been called the previous night -- tilting a sympathetic look in his direction.

"There are no such things as vampires," MacKensie said, "no matter what you've read in Benedek's books--"

"Just like I didn't have an out-of-body trip? Just like you weren't possessed by seven -- count 'em -- seven ghosts? And you never did explain that

little incident in Denver--"

"But none of that supports your vampire theory," MacKensie argued, and Nick decided that just maybe he liked the Briton.

Benedek, on the other hand, was too credulous for his own good, and if he spent any more time with the already-gullible Schanke... "Yes, well, I think perhaps you should work with Dr. MacKensie, Schank. And I'll -- team up with Mr. Benedek."

"Call me Benny," the writer said, grinning affably as he slapped Nick on the back. "We'll catch this blood-sucker!"

"Or whatever it is," Nick replied, his mental ten-count shifting into Old French.

"We should drop by the coroner's office first," Benny suggested brashly. "If what he's got meshes with my--"

"She," Nick corrected. "And her conclusions so far are less than conclusive."

"Yeah? Well, obviously she's askin' the wrong questions." He held up his hands to stop the detective's intended reply. "Not that it's her fault, mind you. After all, they don't get into vampires in your average med-school curriculum, and the average coroner never has to worry about them. But I got all the info your doc's gonna need to put her puzzle together."

"Oh, I'm sure you do," Nick sighed.

"Excuse me," Jonathan said to Nick, a puzzled frown knitting his brows, "but have we met somewhere before? You seem familiar--"

Nick hesitated, then said, "As a matter of fact, Janette duBois is a friend of mine. I believe you were at her club last night...?" He let the pause lengthen meaningfully, and glanced from MacKensie to Benedek. "Under assumed names, it seems."

Jonathan held his hands up in a defensive gesture. "That was entirely Benedek's idea -- I had nothing to do--"

Benny cut in, "Hey, Knight, we didn't mean any harm by it, really. I was just scoping out the place, since all of the victims had been killed either on their way to or from it. Thought maybe Ms. duBois could tell us a little bit about them..." He stopped, meeting Nick's stern gaze nervously. "You can come along with us tonight, if you want. Help the truth go over better, huh?"

"I think that would be wise," Nick agreed, arms folded over his chest. "Janette may not be amused by your little -- prank."

* * * * *

Janette, in fact, was far from amused. Nick managed to catch her eye and give her a warning headshake as MacKensie introduced himself and Benedek, then apologized profusely for his friend's ill-considered deception.

At last he paused and elbowed Benedek.

The journalist, looking only slightly less exuberant than usual, said, "I'm sorry, Ms duBois, I just got a little carried away -- no hard feelings, I hope?" He smiled winningly and stuck out his hand.

"I accept your apology, Mr. Benedek," Janette conceded coolly, ignoring the hand and leading them to a table next to the empty dance floor. "With the clear understanding that it comes with reliable references," she added, with a meaningful glance at Nick. "I would advise you in the future to remember that honesty is almost always the best policy."

"You know, Jon-Boy is always telling me that," Benny said, quite unrepentant. "Maybe I'll give it a shot sometime."

"That should be refreshing," Jonathan muttered, earning an approving look from Janette.

She took his arm, pulling him down onto the chair next to hers. "Perhaps we can deal together, Dr. MacKensie," she purred, raising warning hairs on the back of Nick's neck. A seductive Janette was more dangerous than an angry one.

The smile on Jonathan's face showed he was as normal as the next red-blooded male as he fell under Janette's spell.

"Janette," Nick said in a warning tone.

The blue eyes flashed a warning of her own, and Janette wrapped her hands more firmly about Jonathan's arm, holding him closer to her side.

"Now tell me, Dr. MacKensie, what was it you really want to ask me about?" She captured his gaze with her own and smiled encouragingly.

Jonathan flushed and used his free hand to loosen his tie. "Ah, well, it's quite absurd, really, but we were just wondering if you would tell us anything about the, er, murder victims." He took a deep breath and finished, "Since they were, well, clients of your nightclub."

"Were they?" Janette inquired, glancing at Nick. "Yes, I believe Detective Knight mentioned that detail. But I can't tell you much about these men, I'm afraid -- there are so many people who come in here every night, and I am so busy..."

Benedek interjected, "Yeah, but you gotta be able to tell us something about that Martin guy -- the police reports say he's been coming here at least twice a month for the last three years..."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about him," Janette said, not looking at Benny. "Have you plans for your evenings while here in Toronto, Dr. MacKensie?" She casually played with the hair curling at his collar.

Jonathan opened his mouth, blinked, then shook his head. "I'm -- uh, on assignment, Ms. duBois."

"Surely you must have a hobby? Something you enjoy doing in your spare time?"

Benedek said slyly, "Tell her about your Ramapithecus theory, Jon-Boy."

Jonathan's brown eyes brightened and he said, "Yes, well, actually this paranormal investigation is only a sideline of mine, Ms. duBois. My real love is anthropology -- I've been working on establishing the place of Ramapithecus in our evolutionary history, and I've got quite a few fascinating pieces of evidence..."

"Anthropology," Janette repeated, hanging on to her smile and his arm. "How -- interesting."

"Since I've been assigned to the Paranormal Research, I haven't had as much time to work on my project," Jonathan continued, his face alight with boyish enthusiasm. "Although Dr. Moorhouse did allow me to spend two weeks on a dig this summer--"

"Yeah, ol' Jonny here can go on for hours about old bones, monkey men and dead guys," Benedek said cheerfully, elbows on the table and blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Hours?" Janette said weakly.

"Don't exaggerate, Benedek," MacKensie chided, glaring at his partner. "He's exaggerating."

Janette looked at Nick who was leaning back in his chair, his forefinger stroking his upper lip. He caught her glance and sat up. "I should be getting back to the station now. Can I give you two a lift?"

"Nah," Benny said dismissively, looking around at the crowd beginning to gather. "This looks like my kinda party."

Nick gave Janette an "I tried" shrug and started to rise from his chair, dropping back at the look she shot him.

"Did you know that the bicameral brain existed in proto-hominids half a million years ago, Ms. duBois?"



"No, I -- didn't," Janette said, looking a trifle worried as Benedek waved over a waiter and started murmuring to him.

"What's your poison, Detective K? Ol' Benny's buying," Benedek said with an expansive gesture. "How about you, JJ? Milk as usual?"

"I happen to like milk," Jonathan said. "However, as you are buying, I'll have -- tonic water. Plain."

"Figures," Benedek muttered, raising an eyebrow at Nick.

The detective shook his head and raised a hand. "I'm on duty, thanks anyway."

"Okay. Ms. duBois -- another glass of wine for you?"

Nick gave her a slight warning headshake so Janette smiled, one hand disappearing under the table. "I'm quite -- content with what I have," she said, her voice nearly a purr as she leaned closer to Jonathan.

Jonathan's eyes widened and he jerked back in his chair. "Perhaps we should go, Benedek," he said, his voice at a higher pitch than usual.

"Now?" the writer questioned. "But we were just--"

"Now!" Jonathan squeaked. "Very nice to, er, meet you, Ms. duBois." He stood up quickly as she sat back in her chair, pouting. "Come along, Benedek."

"But, Jon--" Benedek broke off as his friend yanked him to his feet and dragged him off.

"That was dirty, Janette," Nick murmured.

She smiled. "I had to do something, mon cher. I was about ready to confess to the murders myself to get the professor to shut up."

"I noticed," he said, grinning as he stood up. "Good night, Janette." He hurried outside to find the pair arguing by the Caddy.

--attacking my person!"

Benedek said skeptically, "Oh, come on, Jonny, she just--" He stopped, peering at the professor, and his jaw dropped. "What, you mean she was playing footsie or something under the table with you?"

"Or something," Jonathan said through clenched teeth.

Benedek gave a bark of laughter and slapped his friend's back.

"It's not funny, Benedek!"

Nick cleared his throat. "Shall we go, gentlemen?"

"Yeah, I want to talk with the coroner," Benny said, getting into the front seat of the Caddy.

* * * * *

"Well, I don't know what else we should be checking out," Natalie sighed, uncovering the most recent corpse which she had just trundled out of the cooler. "Exactly what did you have in mind?"

"There's typical vampire stuff that's real easy to miss, Doc," Benny replied, leaning over the body with no apparent awareness that he was directly in Nat's way. "No offense, natch; we're just dealing with more my field than yours."

"Of course, of course," Natalie returned, about three degrees too cheerful. "I certainly don't know anything about vampires, after all. Especially not typical ones," she added, catching Nick's eye for a second before grasping Benedek's shoulder and pulling him back from the body. "Which might be a problem if it were at all relevant to this case," she concluded. "This is a real-life murder investigation, you know."

"With an undead murderer, I'm telling ya," Benedek said. "Look there -- this guy's got holes in his neck! And I'll bet you couldn't find enough blood to fill a teaspoon, could you?"

"A slight exaggeration," she conceded irritably. "Is there a point to

this? Because I still don't see anything supernatural here. Mysterious, I'll give you, but--"

"But hardly proof of a vampire," Jonathan finished for her, standing well back from the corpse and glaring at Benny with all the dignity he could muster around his nausea. "Benedek, Dr. Lambert has obviously got enough to occupy her attention without our--"

"Hey, Jonny-Boy, I know these places give you the creeps." Benny grinned on, quite deliberately oblivious to MacKensie's less-than-subtle hint. "We'll be outta here in a few, no sweat." Turning back to Natalie, he piped up, "Hey, hey, careful where you slice that scalpel? We might not be able to tell--"

This was the last straw. "Would you like to do this?" Nat chirped sarcastically, holding the handle of the knife toward him.

"Thought you'd never ask!" Benny reached for the scalpel, and the coroner flipped it around so that the business end pointed at him.

"That's it! I can put up with about anything, but there are a few simple rules around here. If you can't follow them, I can't have you in here, okay?"

"Oh, come on, Dr. Nat, I been in a bazillion autopsies!"

"Not in my lab," she shot back.

Benedek's smile, if possible, grew even more ingenuous. "Well, Captain Stonetree did say that everybody on the investigation would cooperate with our research..."

"Which makes me feel very sorry for everybody on the investigation who works for Captain Stonetree," Natalie responded sweetly. "I work with these guys. There's a difference. And in here I'm the boss."

"Okay, okay," Benny said, holding his hands up in surrender. "Don't get your pantyhose in a knot, Dr. Nat--"

"I'll try." The look she shot him said quite clearly that the notion of knotting them around Benny's neck was rather tempting. "If we're all ready to be grownups here, let's take it from the top."

"Er, you're not going to -- I mean, if you intend to do -- I'll just wait over here," Jonathan babbled, his complexion suddenly paler than Nick's.

"Are you all right, MacKensie?" the police detective inquired, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Jonathan nodded, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief. "I just need a little air, actually. I think I'll step outside -- and -- uh, I'll be back. Possibly." He dashed out of the lab, a hand to his mouth.

"I can't stand the sight of blood," Benedek confided, "but it doesn't bother me."

"Too bad," Natalie muttered, arching an eyebrow and slanting a glance at Nick.

He hid a smile and said, "So, have you met a lot of vampires, Benedek?"

"Oh yeah," Benedek said with a casual flip of his hand. "Even went to Rumania a few years ago. But they're all over the place; never know where you'll run into one."

"Or where one will run into you, I suppose," Natalie quipped, her mood improving slightly with the in-jokes. "So, how do you know when you've met one?"

"Well, they're sneaky little devils, blend right in with the rest of us. But there are always little giveaways," Benedek informed them, head bent over the body.

"Oh, are there?" The doctor nodded, feigning great interest. "Such as?"

"Well, they generally work night jobs," the journalist said. "They're allergic to daylight, you know. The sun gives them a heckuva burn -- no sunscreen made strong enough for vampires." He glanced up, grinning. "And they can't stand garlic. Guess the Italians were onto something from way back."

"Really," Natalie said, darting a look at Nick, who was watching their guest closely. "I love Italian food."

"You oughta try raw garlic and turnip with chocolate ice cream -- great for the spleen."

That one caught Natalie completely off her guard. "Raw garlic and..." She gulped. "What institution did you say you'd escaped from, Benny?"

"The Georgetown Institute of Science."

"I didn't know they were hiring lunatics now," Natalie quipped.

"Oh sure," Benedek said with a shrug. "There's me and Jack, and Doctor Juliana Moorhouse -- she's one smart lady."

Nick blinked. "I knew a Juliana Moorhouse once..."

"Small world," said Benedek as Jonathan crept back into the lab. "Hey, Jon-Boy, feeling any better?"

The look the professor shot his partner said he would have preferred an unobtrusive return. "Just get on with it," he snapped, wanting the whole business done. "It's not a vampire and once we have enough evidence to satisfy Dr. Moorhouse, we can go back to Georgetown and forget this nonsense. Honestly, Benedek, vampires."

"Honestly, Dr. J. Now look at those holes. At first gander they look like classic vampire marks, but then they don't."

"So that's our proof--"

"And then look just a little bit closer and they look like someone tried to make a real vampire chomp look like a fake trying to look real."

Jonathan stared at Benedek, eyes slightly glazed and mouth slack.

Nick knitted his brows and glanced at Natalie whose expression was mirroring the professor's. "Would you care to elaborate on that theory?" he asked.

"It's as plain as the nose on your face," Benedek said. "The vampire, as a rule, leaves two nice neat little holes in his victim's neck. Like this." He pointed at the corpse.

Natalie blinked and shot a look at Nick.

"Only this guy's got bruising around the holes and they're more jagged than the typical vampire neckbite. So I figure the vamp's trying to make us think she's your average human lunatic killer with a vampire complex." Benedek beamed at his listeners.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said to Nick and Natalie, "I don't know where he gets this sort of thing."

"It's experience, Jacko, and I've had a lot more of it than you have," Benedek said, putting on his wounded expression.

"So you keep telling me," Jonathan said dryly.

"You'd think that after seven years you'd have learned something from me," Benny complained good-naturedly.

"I've often told myself that I should have learned a lot," Jonathan retorted. "Such as getting enough sleep." He checked his watch pointedly. "It's getting close to ten, and I'm tired. We've bothered these people long enough -- let's go back to the motel and tackle this again in the morning."

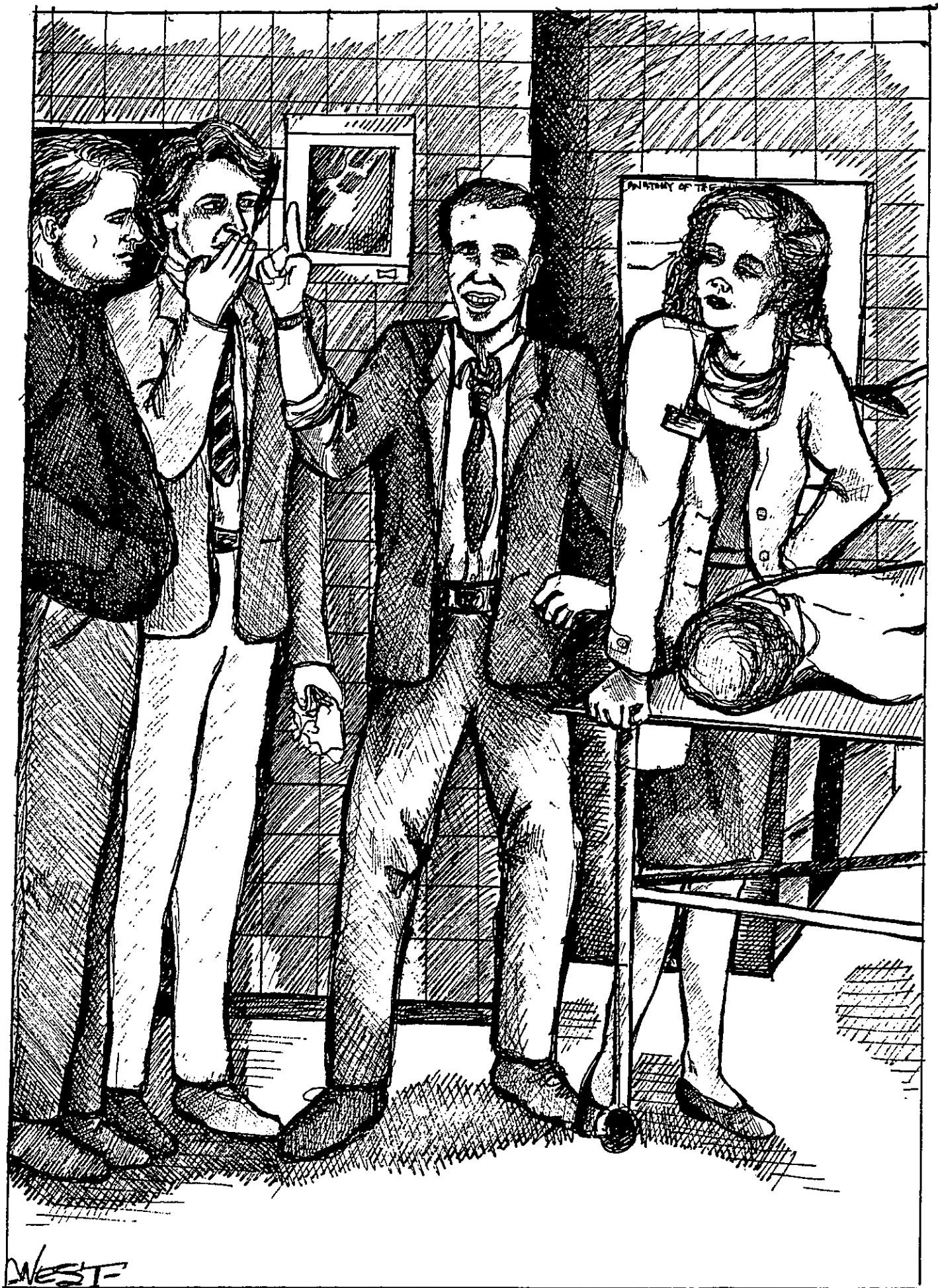
"You're no fun," Benedek said, his grin taking the sting from the observation. "Okay, whatever you want, Jonny. Good night, folks. Nice meeting you, Doctor. So long, Knight." He waved and went out with his partner.

"Nick," said Natalie softly as the door shut behind them. "How accurate was he?"

He sighed, hesitant to meet her questioning gaze. "Too accurate."

Natalie shook her head, covering up the body again. "Well, the good news is we have a bit more to go on, maybe."

"Maybe," Nick conceded thoughtfully. "And the bad news is, he might have



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too much to go on himself."

"Yeah." The coroner crossed her arms tightly. "So I guess we'll have to work pretty hard to keep him from going down the wrong trail, huh?" She moved to open the cooler, then stopped, turning back to Nick as another thought occurred to her. "He called the mystery vampire 'she'. You don't think he suspects Janette, do you? I mean, she fits his little list of criteria."

"So do I," he reminded her glumly. "And I don't know if I can keep him from making that connection. As for whether he suspects Janette..." Nick shook his head. "Let's hope not. This is going to be tricky enough."

"He's not as stupid and harmless as he'd like us to believe, is he?"

"At least we have that much of a weapon," Nick said. "Knowledge can work in our favor as well."

Natalie sat down at her desk, jotting several notes to herself as she said, "Well, technically we should all be on the same side here. Except that he's determined to prove our culprit is a vampire; but even if it is, you and I have to somehow prove it isn't." She sighed heavily. "They don't tell you these things in Forensic Medicine 801, you know that?"

"I know," Nick answered, sitting in his accustomed place on the corner of her desk and grasping her hand. "And I'm sorry I've caught you in the middle."

She squeezed his hand, smiling wryly. "I'm not."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said, poking at his ribs with her free hand. "Come on, help me get Martin there back in the fridge and then you can watch me drink a cup of coffee."

"I'm honored," Nick said dryly.

* * * * *

Nick got home just before dawn and set the answering machine before going to his bed upstairs.

He was awakened at dusk by the ringing phone and his prerecorded message. While he went downstairs, he listened to Janette's voice.

"Nicolas, I need your help at once! Come to The Raven as soon as you can. There has been another murder!"

Nick grabbed up the phone but Janette had already disconnected, so he punched in her private number. "Janette?"

"Nicolas, you must get over here! We must remove the body--"

"Janette, call the police--"

"I called you. I can't have the police here, snooping in my cellar," Janette interrupted.

"The cellar," Nick repeated, feeling slightly dizzy. "Janette, I'll be there as soon as possible, but I'm bringing Schanke. We cannot cover up this murder, not if I'm going to find out who's doing this."

"No, Nicolas--"

Nick hung up and hurriedly dressed, ignoring the warning tone in her voice.

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"Man, oh, man, what a mess." Schanke shook his head. "I mean, she's one tough cookie, but she's gotta be a basket case. Right under her roof, for cripes' sake!"

"Well, she's not happy about it, that's for sure," Nick agreed.

"Probably a good idea if we didn't bring our investigator friends along. About the last thing Janette needs is Benny bugging her about vampires."

"Tell me about it." Frowning at his partner, Nick said, "But aren't you

the one who thinks Benedek is on to something?"

"Well, yeah, but we don't need to go blabbing that to her; she'll think we're nuts."

"Or something along those lines." Privately Nick reflected that she would think Benedek was dangerously well-informed, and her response to that was liable to be rather more assertive than his own, especially when she was so on edge already.

Janette was waiting at the door when they arrived, and did not bother with a greeting. "What's to be done, Nicolas?"

"Take it easy." Nick reached to place a hand on her shoulder, withdrawing it as she shot him a withering glare.

"You're not planning to open tonight, are you?" Schanke asked as they entered, finding several worried-looking people milling about the club's main room. "We'll have to keep the place clear until we're through checking it out."

"Of course," Janette agreed through clenched teeth, leading the way into the cellar. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, she pivoted suddenly to face Schanke, making him jump. "Be careful, please. There are some... very valuable vintages in here."

"Real old stuff, huh?" Schanke asked, practically nose to nose with her.

"Some of it."

Janette kept an eye on the portly detective as he knelt by the corpse and peered around the vicinity. Hanging back with her, Nick asked under his breath, "Does everyone have alternate shelter?"

She looked up at him in alarm. "Why?"

Nick sighed. "We'll have to rope off the cellar for about a day, especially if I'm going to keep the manpower to a minimum."

"You didn't tell me that!" He all but flinched at the tempest brewing in her eyes. "Why couldn't you just help me get him away from here?"

Nick dropped his voice further, glancing over at his partner who was preoccupied and paying no attention to them. "Because if you want to use mortal resources to solve this thing, you'll have to play by mortal rules. Do you want me to catch this creep or not?"

"Of course, but..."

"Besides, no matter where he was found, he'd still be your bartender. The connection is still there."

Schanke spoke up then. "Hey, partner, what do you make of this?"

"What do I make of what, Schank?"

Pointing at the body, Schanke noted, "Looks like our messy eater has learned some table manners."

He was right; the marks on the bartender's neck, while still not as perfect as those left by any vampire Nick had ever met, were also not as torn as the previous examples. Someone had done a sloppy job of covering their tracks this time, probably to avoid being caught by Janette or one of the others. But still, they must have planned pretty carefully to get away with it at all. And it was a safe bet no mortal could have managed it.

"What do you mean, 'messy eater'?" Janette asked, casting Nick a curious look.

"Benedek figured out it's a real vampire trying to make it look like a lunatic who thinks he's a vampire," Schanke said helpfully.

"Oh, Benedek did, did he?"

Glowering at his partner, Nick noted, "There have been some pretty wild theories flying around, haven't there, Schank? And I thought you said we shouldn't bug Janette with them?" For the benefit of the lady in question, who was eyeing Schanke suspiciously, he added, "In fact, I believe your exact words were 'she'll think we're nuts'?"

Janette relaxed somewhat at this indication that her secret was still relatively safe. "Well, I'm sure you have to consider all the information at hand; but it seems to me there are more practical ideas you could consider."

"Yeah, right, I mean, vampires," Schanke said, trying to dismiss the fact he believed Benedek. "Probably is a lunatic who thinks he's a vampire."

"Which could be more dangerous than the real thing," Janette noted. "If there were such things."

"Right," Schanke said after the space of a heartbeat.

"Right," she repeated, shooting a look at Nick that plainly said he wasn't off the hook yet.

When they had completed their cursory examination of the scene, Nick ignored Janette's wordless protests to call in a minimal investigation team. "I don't have any choice," he told her as Schanke headed upstairs to interview the other witnesses. "Look, go upstairs with the others and make sure they have places to stay tomorrow morning." He hesitated. "Of course, you're welcome at my place if you want. Just stay clear of the investigation, okay? Nat and I can keep things under control when the forensics team gets here; and there's no reason for them to snoop anywhere awkward anyway. They'll be out of here in no time, and then only Schanke and I will have access. Good enough?"

"I suppose so," she began uncertainly.

"Okay, then. Just stay out of the way. Go to my place, and I'll keep you posted."

"Very well." Her tone told him it was not very well at all, but he had given her no real options. Turning on her heel, she climbed the stairs, leaving him alone with the corpse.

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"Well, Stan," Natalie muttered to the body bag on the table, "You didn't have much to say, did -- whoa!" Finding Janette quite suddenly between herself and the table, she reflexively stepped back against her desk. "Don't do that!"

"Do what?" the vampire asked ingenuously.

"Very funny." Nat crossed her arms, sitting on the desk to cover up her instinctive retreat. "The only other person who was in here a second ago was Stan there, and I expect him to stay there. There's only been one exception to that; friend of yours, I think."

Janette nodded. "And life suddenly wasn't so simple anymore, hmm?"

Ignoring the question, Natalie asked instead, "So what do you need? I thought you were going to be at Nick's place."

"By dawn. In the meantime, I thought I'd get your opinion of the goings-on. We haven't had a chance to talk."

"You want my opinion?"

"Nicolas values it and he trusts you. Apparently, he expects me to trust you as well. I find the idea difficult -- I have not placed my trust in any mortal in centuries. I prefer to rely on your intelligence than Mr. Schanke's."

"Thanks," Nat replied uncertainly. "I think. But if it's so difficult, why the sudden candor?"

"Does it matter?" Tilting her head to one side, Janette suggested, "Or maybe I'm not the only one unwilling to trust?"

"Nick's too busy, so you came here," Natalie translated.

"Nicolas refuses -- I want answers, not arguments," Janette said, turning her attention to the corpse. "What happened?"

"Someone put holes in his neck and disposed of most of his blood," Nat said bluntly. She arched an eyebrow at the look Janette sent her and walked to the

other side of the table. "Whether the killer used a siphon and a pump, or just his fangs, is still open to debate."

"I understand Mr. Benedek has been debating it rather enthusiastically."

"Ah." The coroner nodded. "He does seem to have a lot of twos and twos, but if he's put any together he's putting on one hell of a show. Last I saw him he was still trying to convince Nick that vampires exist."

"He said nothing of the sort to me," Janette mused. "Which would mean he's afraid I'll laugh at him -- or he's afraid to reveal that he's on to me."

"Well, my guess is the former. He hasn't been telling Nick to haul you in or anything." Natalie shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Listen, be really careful. We have no way of knowing what he'll do if he does find out what you are. I don't think he would automatically assume you're the killer, but I wouldn't bet the farm on it. He doesn't seem to think there are more than one of you around, I don't think; so he could jump to that conclusion."

Janette nodded, absorbing all this. "This has been helpful," she concluded. Catching the other woman's eye, she added in a different tone, "I was not here. You will not tell Nick I was here."

"I won't tell him," Natalie agreed.

Satisfied, Janette released her gaze and turned toward the door.

"Janette?" The vampire turned in surprise at the voice, as deadly calm as Nick's could be, and realized she had made a tactical error. "Don't ever try that again."

Casting her a curious smile, Janette nodded acknowledgment of this before leaving.

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"But Dr. Moorhouse, there's no proof of vampires," Jonathan said into the phone, pacing as he held the phone base to his chest. "Well, I suppose that's true -- I don't have proof it isn't, either. But be reasonable -- no, of course I'm not accusing you of being an unreasonable person--"

"You might as well cry uncle, Smilin' Jack. Dr. M. has you by the short and curlies," Benny cut in, blue eyes laughing.

Jonathan glared at him, pausing in his pacing and then turning his back on Benedek. "Now, Dr. Moorhouse, you must admit I've gone beyond the call of duty. This paranormal research was only supposed to last a few months, and we've been doing it for seven years. Well, yes, I have enjoyed it, for the most part, but Benedek believes it's a real vampire." His tone of voice was wheedling, trying to be manipulative by degrees of pleading and cajoling. "What? Yes, he's here..." With a sigh, Jonathan held the receiver out toward his smirking partner. "She wants to talk to you."

Benedek's grin broadened, and he accepted the phone. "What's up, Dr. M? Yeah, Jonny's being his skeptical self, but we're working on him... Of course I think we need more time here... We can?! Great!"

Jonathan groaned, covering his eyes with a hand.

"Gotta go, Dr. M, but we'll keep you informed!" Benedek hung up and beamed at his friend. "She says we can stay as long as we need to, just as long as we keep the expenses reasonable."

"Reasonable? You pick a motel that usually charges hourly rates because the clientele are of a questionable class, and you think this is reasonable?"

"Take a chill pill, Buds," Benny said, completely unruffled by Jonathan's ire. "I got us a good deal."

"Because most sane people are afraid to stay in a place like this!"

"And look at what they're missing."

Jonathan began to sputter. "Hot and cold running rodents? Noisy neighbors

who keep us awake all night?"

"At least they know how to enjoy themselves," Benedek pointed out. "You could try it sometime, Jon-Boy."

"I don't think--"

"Got our dinner right here," interrupted Benedek, fishing into two fast-food take-out bags. "Two dogs with everything for me, and a jumbo cup of clam chowder for you. Even got some of those crackers that look like little goldfish." He set out the repast, took out two styrofoam cups of coffee and pried the lid off one of them.

"Yes, well, thank you, Benedek." Jonathan resignedly reached for the other coffee. "Uh, did you remember the Sweet'n'Low?"

"Sure, sure," the journalist said, tossing two pink packets onto the desktop. He flopped down on one of the beds and crossed his ankles. "Listen, Jonny, I found out a few things at the library today."

"You're reading literature now?"

"Remember the headline on the 'bloid story with Schanke's pic?" asked Benedek, around a mouthful of hot dog.

"Something about vampire killers," ventured Jonathan, sitting at the desk and opening up his cup of chowder and sniffing at it.

"Uh huh. Except the operative word was another vampire killer," Benedek said.

Jonathan lifted an eyebrow. "Knight told me all about it. The murders were committed by a lunatic with a fixation on blood donors."

"Most of them were," Benedek agreed. "But one victim was different." He tossed a sheaf of paper-clipped photocopies at the professor. "The museum guard who died the night the artifact was stolen."

"What artifact?" Jonathan picked up the papers that had bounced off his chest and landed on the floor, and he spread them on the desktop.

"Thought that'd get your attention, JJ. Get this -- it was used by the Mayans to offer blood sacrifice."

Jonathan paused, looking at the spoonful of chowder he'd just lifted to his lips, then let the spoon drop into the creamy liquid. "Blood sacrifice. But the Mayans haven't been around in a long time, Benedek."

"Maybe so, but a lot of people still do bizarre things with blood. Take a look at the cup."

Jonathan obediently searched through the clippings until he found a photo of a carved jade cup. He slid his glasses along his nose, trying to change the focus. "It's got fangs," he said faintly.

"Looks like a vampire to me."

"Well, that doesn't mean anything," Jonathan argued, turning the picture face down on the desktop. "It probably depicts some sort of animal--"

"Yeah, a vampire. The features are human, Jacko."

"Vaguely," Jonathan admitted reluctantly. "Okay, maybe the Mayans did believe in vampires but that doesn't mean they exist."

"Somebody wanted that fancy coffee cup enough to murder for it. Who -- or what -- would want it? What were they gonna do with it? Join the coffee club at the Seven-Eleven?"

"So I suppose a vampire wanted it for some foul ceremony?" Jonathan said sarcastically.

"Maybe."

"All right," Jonathan sighed, "just suppose for a moment that this museum guard was unconnected to the other murders and unexplained. Don't you think they'd be taking that into consideration now? Obviously your information is incomplete."

"My information is right on the money, Buds, and you know what else it

tells me?"

"I can't begin to imagine."

Benny grinned. "No, I bet you can't. So I'll tell you -- the museum guard got lumped in with the other murders, case closed -- and the rather glaring inconsistencies got glossed over in the coroner's report."

The professor stared at him, uncertain whether he had in fact heard the wild assertion correctly. "Oh, come on, Benedek, you don't seriously think that Dr. Lambert--"

"Is in cahoots with our bloodsucker?" Benny finished for him. "You bet I do, pal. Just like Renfield, only prettier. Except she doesn't eat bugs," he amended. "Though she does cut up dead people all day."

"Benedek, in all the time I've known you, that is the single most ridiculous theory you have ever put forth!" Jonathan sputtered. "Even if there was a vampire -- which there isn't -- what possible reason could Dr. Lambert have for helping him?"

Unruffled, the reporter replied, "I never said he gave her a choice, Jonny B. Goode. Vampires can mess with people's minds, you know!"

"Dr. Lambert's mind is in perfect working order," Jonathan assured him. "It's yours I'm not so certain of."

"Oh, Jonny, that hurts," Benny protested, grin never slipping. "But don't you see, it makes perfect sense. He gets his hooks in her, and not only can he make her cover for him, but he also has the benefit of her wunderkind brainpower and privileged inside info! It's the ideal setup." His face fell as he began considering the implications of his own theory. "Oh, man, we gotta do something!"

As usual, Benny was seven skips ahead of Jonathan, who asked in confusion, "About what?"

"About Dr. Nat, of course!" If anything, Benny's intensity increased as his potential story became a rescue operation. "Don't you see, we gotta help her before Fang-Face decides she's outlived her usefulness -- or worse, decides she'd be more useful on *his* side of the undead Checkpoint Charlie! Vampire slaves do not have promising life expectancies, Jacko; we gotta cut her loose!"

"Cut her loose from what? Benedek? Benedek!" Jonathan was talking to thin air as Benny breezed out of their room. Jonathan jumped up, snatching up his suit jacket as he hurried after Benny. He arrived at the sidewalk in time to see the tail lights of their rental car as Benny squealed down the street.

Jonathan stood there for a moment, then hailed a cab. If Benedek was on a rescue mission, odds were that he was on his way to the coroner's lab. At least, Jonathan hoped that was where the frenetic journalist was headed.

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Benny's mind was racing as he steered the car toward the Twenty-Seventh Precinct. His initial intent had been to track down Dr. Lambert, but a lack of ideas about what to do when he got to her had prompted him to seek reinforcements.

He didn't know how much Knight could help, but he did know that rumors about the detective and the M.E. flew pretty thickly in the precinct. And no matter what might or might not be between them, he had reliable intelligence that Knight jumped when Natalie was in danger.

The rental car halted abruptly at the curb, and Benny jumped out and dashed into the building. "Hey, Norma, is Knight here?" he called to the pretty black woman at the desk.

"Yeah, he's back at his desk," she answered. "Something wrong?"

"Oh, yeah." He flashed a brilliant, distracting grin at the perplexed

young woman. "Thanks, good lookin'."

"Just another night in the monkey house," she muttered, shaking her head.

"Yo, Knight!"

Nick raised his head from the paperwork spread in front of him. "Something wrong, Benedek?"

"I gotta talk to you about Dr. Nat. I think she's in danger from the vampire!"

Nick stood up rapidly. "Vampire? Where?!"

"I don't know where he is, that's the problem. But I think the answer is tied to the museum guard's death a year ago."

Nick drew his brows together. "What do you know, Benedek. Tell me."

Benny opened his mouth and was surprised at what he heard himself saying. "Dr. Nat is obviously under the vampire's control -- he's taken her brain out, played with it and put it back. He's got her covering up for him, probably passing on information about your investigation. He's the one responsible for the museum guard's murder, and probably that curator's too. Did you know that Dave the undertaker lost her body? They planted an empty box."

"They what?" Nick sat down heavily. "How do you know that?" he added, regaining his composure.

Benny shrugged. "One of my contacts found out the guy had a weakness for raspberry margaritas, and went from there. Ol' Dave was afraid of losing his job, so he just kept his mouth shut when he found out he was short one customer."

"Alyce Hunter," Nick whispered, closing his eyes at the stab of pain the name brought. For a moment he remembered vividly the feel of her dying body in his arms after Lacroix had taken her... He shook off the memory and leaned back in his chair, forefingers of his right hand stroking across his mouth.

After a moment, Nick said, "It's an interesting theory."

"Theory nothing, pal. The vampire got the curator, and Dr. Nat is next. Just sit here with your paperwork -- I got a life to save," Benny said in disgust, turning his back on Nick.

"Benedek, wait! Stop and think a minute -- just what are you going to do?"

"I don't have a minute to think," Benny retorted.

"Hey, slow down," Nick insisted, grabbing the other man's shoulder. "Does this mean you know who and where?"

"Well, no," Benny admitted.

"Then what are you planning?"

"I was kinda hoping you'd have some ideas," Benedek said, hitching his shoulders up in a defensive shrug. "Look, Knight, the scuttlebutt is that you and the doc are pretty close. If you don't want to see her end up in her own cooler -- or worse -- you'll help me save her life."

"I don't want to see that happen to anyone," Nick assured him. "But right now we don't even know where to find her -- she might still be at the lab, or she might have gone home. Let me call and find out."

"Good idea."

Reaching for the telephone to dial Nat's lab number, Nick fought to keep Benedek's panic from infecting him. After all, there was no real reason to believe she was in imminent danger; the reporter's theory had more than a few gaping holes in it.

When her voice mail picked up on the fourth ring, Nick hung up and quickly punched in her home number.

"No answer?" Benedek asked anxiously. "Oh, man, I knew it!"

"Calm down," Nick insisted, as much to himself as to Benedek. "She must be on her way home; we can meet her there."

Nick paid scant attention to his companion's chatter as they drove toward

Natalie's apartment, his mind circling around Benedek's wild theory and fearing that it might hold a grain of truth. He knew he had never used his vampiric power to influence her mind, true; but he also knew there were more subtle ways of manipulating people. Was he guilty of that sort of selfishness?

"Yo, Dr. Nat, answer the door, will ya?"

"You don't need to break down the door, Benedek, I have a key," Nick said, pulling the journalist away from the door. It was really a futile effort, since Nick could sense the only presence in the apartment was that of Sidney the cat.

Benedek's eyebrows shot up at that tidbit but he made no comment as he followed Nick inside. "Nice digs," he observed idly, bending down to scratch Sidney as the cat twined around his ankles.

Nick raised an eyebrow, glancing at the brightly painted walls and the sense of an apartment that was rarely inhabited because its owner was often out. "Yeah, guess so." He ducked into the kitchen, then walked down the hall to the bedroom. "She's not here."

"Aw, jeez," Benedek moaned. "We're too late!"

"She's probably still on her way home," Nick told him, fidgeting with the keys. "I'll call her beeper number." He went to the phone and dialed.

Benedek jumped at the shrill sound of the doctor's beeper that lay on the coffee table.

"And does she normally leave her pager at home?" he asked, snatching up the device and waving it at Nick. "Something's really wrong here, Knight!"

The detective was beginning to agree with him. He felt more than a touch of *deja vu*; only this time he feared that finding her might not be as simple as the address on a florist's box. Sternly he reminded himself that there was still no reason to believe she was in trouble. "What made you decide all this now, anyway?" he asked Benedek. "What makes you think Natalie's a target?"

"Just a hunch," the reporter answered.

"Pretty strong hunch if you're this worked up about it," Nick pointed out.

"Well, where is she?" Benedek returned.

Nick sighed, glancing over the objects burying her dining room table for clues. "I don't know."

"The museum," Benedek said suddenly. "I think we should go to the natural history museum where that guard was killed. That's the key, Knight."

The detective looked up sharply at this. "That's the second time you've said that," he pointed out, not liking the conclusion he was reaching. "Why is that the key?"

"Well, it's just..." For the first time since Nick had met him, Benedek seemed to be at a loss for words. "It's a hunch," he finished lamely.

"A hunch," Nick repeated, eyeing the abandoned beeper in Benny's hand. "All right, let's go."

* * * * *

Jonathan was having little luck in tracking his partner. No one at the coroner's lab had seen him -- or Dr. Lambert, for that matter. Since no one would release her address, he decided to try the precinct house and Detective Knight. Norma, the clerk, was only minimally susceptible to the MacKensie charm.

"Benedek was here to see Detective Knight," Norma told him as he leaned on her counter. "They flew out of here about half an hour ago."

"Did they say where they were going?" Jonathan asked, flashing the boyishly charming grin that seldom failed.

"Sorry."

"Look it's very important that I find him," he said, tapping a pen on the

back of his hand. "Are you absolutely certain he didn't say anything?"

"Well, I did hear them mention Dr. Lambert--"

"Do you have her address?"

"I'm not allowed--"

"Please? I'd be ever so grateful," Jonathan wheedled.

"It's against our rules," Norma told him.

"Puh-lease?" he persisted, managing to sound remarkably like Roger Rabbit. "It's very important, possibly even a matter of life and death!"

Norma stared at him, then sighed. "Dr. Lambert's in the telephone book." She slapped the appropriate volume of the white pages up on the counter and added pointedly, "I never told you that."

"Thank you," he enthused, flipping it open. There were three N. Lamberts, and no Natalie, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He scribbled down the phone numbers, blew Norma a kiss, and headed for the hallway's pay phone.

The second number he called had Natalie's voice on the answering machine. He listened to its end, on the off-chance she would pick up, then stammered his way through a vague message.

Hanging up, Jonathan frowned, then pulled up the directory hanging under the phone, and looked up the address of the Museum of Natural History.

Tapping his pen against his lips, Jonathan shrugged and wrote it down, then left. It was worth a try...

* * * * *

The museum was dark and quiet when Nick's Caddy pulled up in front of it. Benedek hopped out at once, then hesitated, looking at the detective. "Maybe we should call for back-up or something?"

"They wouldn't come," Nick said, "without a reason. And your hunch won't hold any weight with my captain." He looked at the journalist, then jerked his head at the building. "Come on, Benedek."

Benny started forward, then hesitated. "I dunno..."

"What's the matter?" Nick asked. "We're just going to have a look around."

"Well, uh... maybe we should wait until tomorrow, when the place is open?"

This was a change of tune. "What happened to your dire emergency, Benedek?"

The reporter shook his head. "No way I'm goin' in there!"

He was close to panic, and Nick relented. "Okay, okay. Wait in the car; it breaks fewer rules anyway."

"Right."

"And, Benedek?" Nick pointed to emphasize his words. "Stay put."

"Right," Benny repeated.

Nick watched him retreat to the Caddy, then ducked around the corner of the building. It was just as well; he wasn't certain if he could have gotten in with Benedek in tow, since the only way he knew was through the skylight. And if his fears were justified... well, it was best if Benedek stayed in the car.

"Alyce?" His footsteps echoed through the empty hall, but there was no sign of anyone else. "I'm here. Is that what this is all about?"

No response; maybe he was wrong. He hoped he was wrong. "Alyce?"

"At last you remember me."

The voice came from the Mayan exhibit hall and Nick's blood chilled. "Why are you doing this, Alyce?"

"Why? You owe me, Nick," the dark-haired woman said. She stood by the glass display case which held a carved jade cup that looked like the one in Benedek's photocopy. Her hand stroked the top of the case, her dark eyes glowing. "Was it worth it?"

"Alyce--"

Her fist crashed through the case, snatching up the cup. "I begged you -- but you let him do this to me! And then you abandoned me!"

Nick swallowed hard, his gaze not leaving her yellowed eyes. She was mad, and he knew why, if she had returned as a masterless vampire...

"Alyce, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to abandon you. I thought LaCroix had killed you--"

"Oh, he did," she said, cocking her head to one side. "But I didn't stay dead."

"I couldn't know that," he told her reasonably, taking a few cautious steps toward her. "If you had come to me, I could have helped you, taught you to keep control." He stopped in his tracks at a low warning growl in the back of Alyce's throat. "Alyce, please, listen to me. This is why I couldn't take you, don't you see? I never wanted you to become like this."

"But I did."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Do you know what it was like to wake up in a body bag, being slammed around like a side of beef? To be overwhelmed by a raging Hunger and mindlessly rip out the throat of an innocent child who had the misfortune of wandering the streets at night? I could smell the blood of every single body around, hear their heartbeats. You didn't even care enough about me to see what he had done to me!" The jade cup in her hand shattered under the pressure of her grip.

"I thought it was over!" he insisted. "Please, Alyce, try to remember who you are. You're not a killer." He held out his hand to her, palm up. "I failed you before; let me help you now."

Alyce merely laughed, and Nick's hopes for her sanity began to fade. "Help me? I'm doing just fine, Nick, can't you see that? I figured it out. I learned what to do all by myself. And I learned that a killer is exactly what I am."

"You're not." Nick struggled to keep calm, still offering her his hand. "I can't undo what happened to you, but it doesn't have to be this way."

"It'll be any way I see fit!" she snapped. "You abandoned me, and you have to pay for that!"

This was not going well. "All right, maybe I do," he conceded. "Then your argument is with me, not with those men you killed." He hesitated, hoping fervently his next words would not be a fatal mistake. "Not with Natalie."

"My, aren't we protective?" Her voice dripped sarcasm, her features twisted by rage. "Where were you when I needed protecting?"

"I killed LaCroix for you," he said, images of that night filling his mind's eye. "I held you in my arms, Alyce, I felt your life seep away. Then I--" he blinked, shook his head. "I must have lost consciousness. I was weak from not feeding--"

"You could have fed from me," she said. "I begged you to do it -- but your damned sense of honor wouldn't let you, would it?"

"Maybe not," he said quietly. "Where is Natalie?"

"I'll take care of her later. You may think you've protected the others, too, but the public will soon decide that nest of vampires needs to be cleaned out. I've spent the last year learning all about the underground society and how to deal with them. I even have someone to keep the public informed."

"Benedek," Nick guessed dully. "Alyce, you have to stop this! Don't you see, this has gone beyond anger at me! You can't destroy people for the pleasure of it -- that was LaCroix's way."

She tossed him a nasty smile. "Maybe he had a point."

Nick shook his head, a leaden knot settling in the pit of his stomach. "I can't let you do this. I can't let you keep on with this."

"Is that a threat?" She sounded less than concerned.

"It's a fact. You're out of control, Alyce, breaking every law imaginable -- mortal or vampire. If you don't stop, I'll have no choice but to stop you."

"How long did it take you to stop LaCroix? How many lives did it take?"

"Yo, Knight, did you find her?"

Nick turned his head fractionally, trying to keep Alyce in sight.
"Benedek, get out of here!"

Alyce laughed and sprang up into the air. A moment later she had touched down behind Benedek, one arm shooting out to snag his collar as he tried to run.
"Don't go yet, Benny. I'm not finished with you!"

Nick whirled to face them, pausing as Alyce snaked an arm around Benedek's throat, holding him still.

"Uh, do we know each other?" the journalist ventured, his hands tugging on the arm at his throat.

"Have you forgotten already?" she purred. "Oh -- of course you did! I wanted it that way. But now I want you to remember everything you see... like Nick's death."

"I really am the wrong one for this -- Jonathan has a photographic memory," Benny said, struggling for breath as her arm tightened.

"You're perfect," she said, her free hand stroking the pounding vein in Benny's neck.

"Jonny would disagree there, Dr. Hunter."

Benny's usage of her proper name brought Alyce's caress to a halt.

"Alyce, think about what you were before. Why you wanted me to change you," Nick said, pressing the unexpected advantage. "You were a scientist."

"And now I'm a vampire," she hissed, baring her fangs at Nick.

Nick snarled, his own eyes glowing yellow as his fangs descended.

Benny's eyes fairly bugged out of his head, and he tugged harder on the arm around his neck in an effort to free himself. "Whoa!" he gurgled, flailing in panic.

"Hello?" Jonathan's voice came from the doorway. "Is anyone here -- Benedek!"

Alyce turned her head, distracted, and Nick streaked across the room to grapple with her.

He pulled Benedek free from the vampiress and shoved him toward the door. The journalist stumbled and fell onto his hands and knees.

"Get him out of here, MacKensie!"

Jonathan, jolted out of his immobility by Nick's bellow, ran to his fallen friend. "Benny, are you all right?! My God...!"

"We've gotta get out of here, Buds! It's a vampire showdown," Benny gasped, his voice raspy.

"Vampire--? Benedek, are you all right?" Jonathan asked, pulling Benny to his feet and putting a supporting arm around his shoulders.

"Oh, I'm fine for a guy who was almost a vampire's dinner," Benedek retorted. "Will you get a move on, Jonny?!" He took a step forward and groaned at a stab of pain. "My knee--"

"Lean on me," advised Jonathan, helping him limp toward the exit. "What is going on here?"

"I told ya, a vampire showdown," Benny said, clutching at Jonathan's arm.

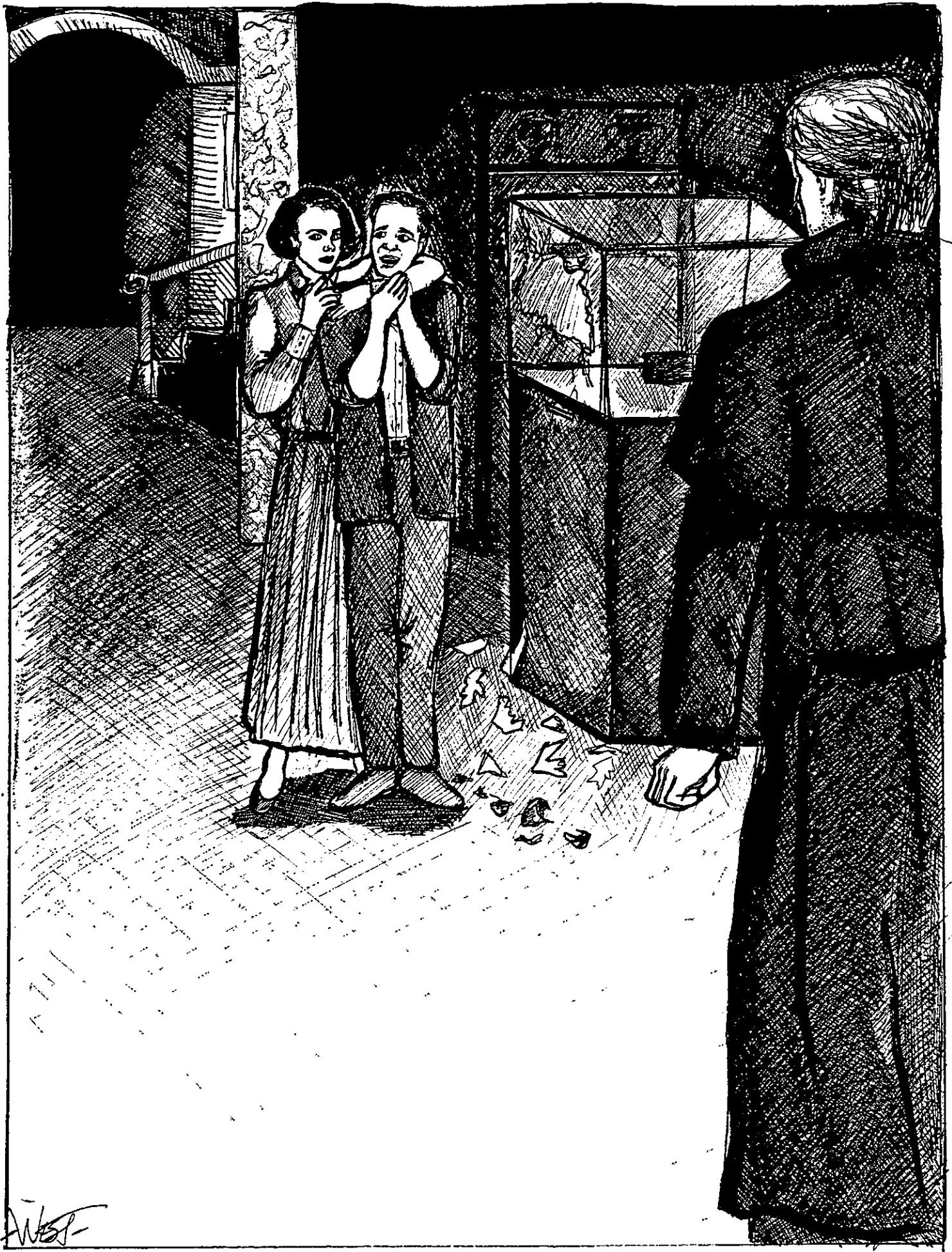
"Don't start that vampire nonsense--"

"You saw the fangs, boy-o," Benny cut in. "And these bruises were made by vampire strength."

"She probably works out--"

"What does it take to convince you? Holes in my neck?"

Jonathan glanced over his shoulder at a crash as a glass display case fell.



Nick and the woman were locked in hand-to-hand combat. He gulped and looked forward hastily. "Is she the -- killer?" He couldn't bring himself to say "vampire".

"Well, she ain't Mrs. Claus," Benedek retorted. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I was trying to find you," the professor told him. "You and Knight had already left, and there wasn't an answer at Dr. Lambert's, so I thought I'd try here. I saw the detective's car outside, and the door was open, so..."

"Yeah, well, I'm glad to see you, pal. But we've got to -- whoa!"

Two men stood in the doorway before them. One held a sharpened stake, and both seemed implacable. Power and strength radiated from them.

Ignoring Jonathan and Benedek, the pair strode past them, toward Nick and Alyce.

"Maybe we should go warn Nick," Jonathan ventured, hanging onto Benny as they clung to the shadows.

"I think we'd better see if his Caddy has a radio and call for help," Benny said, displaying uncharacteristic fear instead of his usual recklessness.

"Those guys look like they mean business," Jonathan protested, swallowing hard as he glanced over his shoulder. "What if they're here to help the killer? I don't think we can get anyone here in time to help Nick."

"Trust me, Buds, this is Nick's battle. Did you see the fangs on those guys? I--" Benny broke off, straightening up and pushing Jonathan away.

"Benedek? What are -- where -- get back here!"

Ignoring him, the reporter headed back inside.

* * * * *

"Look, I know it's nerve-wracking," Natalie said, tucked in the corner of the couch with her knees drawn up inside her huge sweatshirt, "but it won't do you any good to make a pest of yourself. And believe me, they'll call you a pest."

Janette tapped her fingernails on the arm of the chair, not looking at the other woman. "It's my property," she fumed. "They can't keep me out."

"No, but they can keep the place closed a day longer, or two. Or more; somebody might suspicious if you keep going back there. Just because Nick and Schanke are in charge doesn't mean some bored uniform can't decide to take you in for questioning."

"I'd like to see them try," Janette replied pleasantly.

"Oh, that's really gonna help," Natalie groaned. "Look, the point is, you really have nothing to worry about. The uniforms are there to keep people out, and that includes themselves and I guarantee nobody's ransacking your cellar." When the vampire did not reply, she added, "If you really don't trust that, then yes, I'll go over there with you. I imagine we can think up some excuse. But it's really a waste of time."

"I have to do something." Slim fingers dug into the leather upholstery of the chair, leaving a crescent of little indentations when Janette realized what she was doing and released her grip. "How long does he expect me to sit around and wait for--" She broke off abruptly, eyes wide in alarm. "Nicolas?" she whispered.

"What? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Janette told her, snapping out of her momentary shock and snatching up the remote control unit to unlock the window.

"Wait a minute!" Nat jumped up from the couch and dashed to the window before the other woman could open it. "At least tell me where; I'll follow in the car."

"No. Whatever he's gotten himself into, I don't think it's in your league this time. If you want to help, do it by keeping out of harm's way."

"That's my risk to take, Janette." The mortal woman's voice was just slightly louder than it needed to be.

"Is it really?" Janette pushed up the window, her attention still on Natalie. "And who do you suppose will have to try and put him back together again if he loses you?"

Natalie couldn't begin to react to that before Janette disappeared in a rush of wind.

* * * * *

Jonathan MacKensie was not certain he knew what was happening around him, but he was determined not to leave his friend alone in the midst of it. He dashed after the journalist and grabbed his arm. "Benedek, this isn't funny! Come on, Benny--" He broke off as Benedek looked up at him with a chilling, unBenedeklike smile. "Go away," Benedek ordered.

Jonathan threw both arms around him, doing his best to drag Benedek toward the doorway. It became difficult as the shorter man began thrashing against him. "Bene -- oof!" Jonathan gasped as Benny dug a pointed elbow into his midriff and broke free. "What are you--? Have you gone mad?!"

Benedek had snatched up a paddle-shaped club encrusted with sharp bits of flint, and he was swinging the weapon at his friend.

"A simple 'no' would have sufficed," Jonathan reassured him, ducking out of the way of the nasty thing. "Benedek, for heaven's sake, what are you doing?!" When the only answer was another swing of the weapon, MacKensie managed to grab Benedek's wrist and get the thing away from him, twisting his arm behind his back.

"Ow!" the reporter squawked. "Take it easy, Jacko, I -- hey, what are we doing back in here?"

"I've been asking you that, myself," Jonathan said, maintaining his hold on Benny. "I followed you and you went after me with that thing."

"I what? Will ya ease up, Buds? You're hurting me," Benny complained, squirming in Jonathan's grasp.

"What? Oh, sorry," Jonathan said, obligingly releasing his grip. "I didn't -- Benedek!"

Benedek bolted toward Nick, who had Alyce pinned against the floor, his hands holding her wrists above her head.

When Benedek slammed into Nick, the vampire reacted with a snarl and a sweep of his arm that sent the human sprawling into a heap several feet away.

Jonathan gave an exclamation and ran to his friend, still carrying the ceremonial war-club.

Nick blinked, then fell back as Alyce took advantage of his momentary distraction and surged upwards. Regaining her feet, she leaped into the air and laughed down at the others.

Jonathan's jaw dropped at this, and the two ominous-looking men -- he refused to accept Benny's identification of them as vampires -- stepped past the sprawled detective, their attention on the clearly-deranged flying woman.

"Not so fast." The voice came from behind and above him, and his jaw dropped another notch at the sight of the ladylike proprietress of The Raven slipping in through the skylight. "Keep calm," he muttered to himself. "This cannot be happening."

From the looks of things, though, it was; and Janette flew across the ceiling to take hold of Alyce and haul her back to earth, facing the grim pair of strangers.

"Here is the one responsible!" she told them, pushing the former archaeologist forward. "She is the one endangering the rest of us; we have kept the Code!"

Nick got to his feet apprehensively; he was grateful for Janette's presence, but the actions of the Enforcers were unpredictable.

"Code?" Alyce repeated, backing a step away from them, her eyes fixed nervously on the stake one carried. "What is this Code?"

"Even a vampire has to take responsibility for her actions," Nick told her, grasping Janette's hand as she crossed to him. "They are the Enforcers, Alyce. They are sworn to protect our secrets -- no matter what. They won't allow you to reveal us to the mortal world." He shook his head sorrowfully. "If you had come to me for help, you would have known."

Janette tugged at his hand, whispering urgently, "Come on, Nicolas! We must take care of Benedek and MacKensie, and get out of here! Her fate is out of your hands now."

"I know," Nick agreed dully, then turned to Janette and pulling his attention from the impending execution. "Nat! Janette -- that's how she lured me here. We have to find Natalie!"

"Find her? What are you talking about?" Janette responded. "I left her at your house not ten minutes ago."

"My place?"

Overhearing this, Alyce turned to them with a nasty smile, backing away from the Enforcers. "That was a bluff, Nick, couldn't you tell?" To the strange vampires, she added, I'll show you where you can protect your precious Code!" Without warning she rocketed through the skylights. The Enforcers looked at each other, then vanished in pursuit.

"I'll go after them," Janette volunteered. Nodding at the two investigators, she added, "You handle them."

Jonathan stared, quite beyond shock, at the unorthodox departure; Benny blinked, shaking his head to clear it of Alyce's influence. Nick turned to the pair, bringing himself under control. As he took a step toward them, Jonathan clutched at Benny's arm and tried to back away from Nick.

"You did not see any of this," Nick said, his voice low and compelling.

"But she -- you -- it's not possible!" Jonathan babbled.

"That's right. It is not possible and you saw nothing," Nick continued as he held Jonathan's gaze. "We came here looking for Natalie, but she is not here. Nothing happened--"

"Nothing happened? Are you blind, Knight? Didn't you see--"

Nick swung his gaze on Benedek. "You saw nothing."

"Oh, no, I didn't, pal!" Benny protested. "I saw a lot, and it's gonna make one helluva--"

"Don't finish that sentence, Benedek." Nick held up a hand. "If you did see it, then you saw the Enforcers, correct?"

"The guys with the economy-size choppers, you mean?"

"That's exactly what I mean," the detective confirmed. "I think it's a lost cause to convince you this didn't happen, but you cannot make it public."

"Are you nuts? I--"

"Benedek." The reporter halted abruptly, and Nick asserted seriously, "Is any story worth your life -- and MacKensie's, and mine?"

Benny glanced at his partner who was still staring blankly at Knight. Over the years he'd lost count of the number of times Jonny had saved his life, often at risk to himself. "They take their job to heart, huh?"

"Very much so, I'm afraid."

"And Jack here won't remember any of this, so I wouldn't have a witness or evidence anyway. So I guess I didn't see it, either," Benny said with a

careless shrug. He pushed up the sleeves of his jacket and straightened his loosened tie.

With a very sincere sigh of relief, Nick clapped him on the shoulder. "Good." Fishing his keys from his pocket, he handed them to Benedek, instructing, "Take him back to your motel. Stay there. I'll come get the car later."

"But how are you gonna..." Benny trailed off, accepting the keys with a sage nod. "Never mind. See ya later." He took Jonathan by the arm, leading him to the Caddy. "Let's go, Smilin' Jack. You owe me, for a change." He heard a whooshing sound behind them, and he resisted the instinct to turn around. "Watch your step, Jon-Boy."

"Benedek? What happened?" Jonathan mumbled, rubbing his forehead as Benny leaned over and fastened his seat belt.

"You hit your head, Buds," Benny improvised, settling behind the wheel.

"I did? On what?"

"Boy-o, you musta hit it pretty hard," Benny replied with a "tsk". "Don't you remember anything?"

"I -- no." Jonathan shook his head. "Where is Detective Knight?"

"Still looking for Dr. Nat," his partner replied truthfully. "We thought I should get you back to your room."

"Uh...yes, I suppose so." Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he added, "I do hope nothing has happened to Dr. Lambert."

"Me too, pal."

* * * * *

At the sound of the elevator, Nat jumped up from the couch and crossed to the door. "Janette? Nick? What happened? Are you all -- what the hell?"

She backed away rapidly as the door slid open to reveal Alyce Hunter, very much not dead, accompanied by a pair of exceedingly creepy strangers. "What's going on here?" Natalie demanded, putting the couch between herself and the intruders.

"Nick has been very lax," Alyce said, eyes glittering as she approached the coroner. "These -- gentlemen are here to correct the problem."

"Problem?" Natalie repeated, backing away from the menacing trio.

"You."

Natalie knew she didn't stand a chance against the three vampires but she couldn't give in without a fight. Casting about for a weapon, she spied the small chest that held the cross that once belonged to Joan of Arc. It hadn't served her especially well last time, of course... Well, there was no alternative, she told herself sternly, pushing the memory of her brother's rampage out of her mind's eye as she clutched the cross in both hands.

"You see?" Alyce nodded at the relic. "She's dangerous."

At that moment, Janette burst through the door from the stairs and dashed toward Natalie. She halted abruptly a few feet away from the mortal woman, wincing as she turned her back, instead of facing Alyce and the Enforcers. "Put that thing away," she hissed over her shoulder.

"You're crazy!"

"Believe me, it will only incriminate you," Janette insisted. "Put it away! I know what I'm doing."

Natalie hesitated a moment, then returned the cross to its box. "I hope you're right."

"I am. Just hope it matters."

"It doesn't," Alyce assured them. "Mortals aren't supposed to know about us, right? That's the Code, isn't it?"

Janette stood arrow-straight. "What do you know? You're trying to distract attention from the real problem. You're the one who seeks to reveal us to the world; Natalie is one person."

Growling, the taller Enforcer turned to Alyce.

"Yes, she has been killing and leaving a trail that leads to us," Janette persisted. "She wants them to find and destroy us!"

Both Enforcers were glowering at Alyce, and she fell back a step, then bravely stood her ground before them. "She had more opportunity to kill them than I did -- the last one was found in her club!"

"Because you killed him there," Nick said from the doorway. He crossed the room quickly, placing himself between Natalie and the others, next to Janette.

"What took you so long, cheri?" she murmured.

"Benedek was -- difficult, but it's taken care of now," he answered.

If it hadn't been Nick saying that, Natalie thought, she wouldn't have liked the sound of it. She opened her mouth, then shut it and opted for listening instead.

"It's his fault!" Alyce screamed as the Enforcers stepped forward and took her by the arms. "He's responsible for what I've become! He's got to be punished!"

"LaCroix changed her," Janette spoke up in Nick's defense.

"Yes, because he refused and then he let LaCroix take me," Alyce spat, struggling as the Enforcers tightened their hold on her. "He didn't help me!"

"Nicolas, it's for the best," Janette cautioned as he made a move toward Alyce. "Let them deal with her -- there is nothing we can do. She is crazed."

"You can't mean to just let them kill her!" Natalie protested unwisely, drawing attention back to herself.

"No!" Nick cried as one Enforcer turned his gaze on Natalie. "She is not a danger -- I have complete control over her."

"What--?!"

The look Nick shot her stilled Natalie's indignant protests.

"It's true," Janette spoke up, placing a hand on Natalie's arm. "She has protected us and would never betray us."

Nick turned to Natalie, a pleading look in his eyes. "You will not reveal what has happened this night."

"Of course, I won't."

The Enforcer's thought rang in Nick's and Janette's minds. See that she does not -- or we will return.

Then, with one accord, they walked from the apartment, Alyce between them.

The archaeologist struggled futilely. "Nick!"

He squeezed his eyes tight against his inability to help her. As soon as the trio was gone, he embraced Natalie, his relief a palpable thing. She clung to him in response.

Janette glanced at them, then discreetly turned away. After a decent interval, she remarked, "You do lead an exciting life, Nicolas. I feel absolutely drained."

Raising his eyebrows at the turn of phrase, Nick responded, "It has been quite a night." To Natalie, he went on, "Sorry about that. It was all I could think of; but it was a bluff. I would never take advantage of..." He trailed off uncertainly as she threw him a patented Natalie Lambert "get real" look. "I get the feeling I'm wasting my breath."

"Good guess. I mean, if I don't know better than that by now..."

"Now let's hope they didn't know it was a bluff," Janette put in. "Though I doubt we will be so fortunate. They'll be keeping tabs on her, no doubt."

"You mean the vampire Big Brother will be looking over my shoulder? Can't you do anything about it, Nick?"

"Natalie, the Enforcers have existed as long as vampires have walked the earth," Nick said, carefully choosing his words. "They have become the most powerful of us, rather like the Inquisitors. If they had decided to kill us, we wouldn't have stood a chance."

"We?"

"Of course," Janette spoke up. "We certainly could not go unpunished for allowing a mortal to learn our secret."

The matter-of-fact statement struck Natalie like a physical blow. "You mean that stake could have been for you two."

"That's right," Nick confirmed. "We would be the criminals, Nat. And you'd be nothing but an inconvenience to be removed."

Casting him a sharp look, she inquired, "So how come you never mentioned all this?"

Nick scratched his eyebrow and offered a tentative smile. "I thought it wouldn't come up."

Natalie stared at him, then looked at Janette, who merely shrugged as if to say, 'That's my Nicolas.'

"Right," sighed Natalie. "So I'll watch my step from now on."

"We all will," Nick assured her, taking her hand. "I'm sorry for not warning you--"

"Well, I know now and I'm not sure knowing before would have changed my mind," she said, giving his hand a squeeze.

"Nicolas, is it safe for me to return to the club?" Janette asked, intruding on their moment.

He looked over at her as if reminded of her presence. "I think you should be able to, yeah." He shook his head. "Time to think up a good story for Schanke and the Captain so we can close this mess."

* * * * *

"Man, what a wacko." Schanke managed to simultaneously shake his head and take another bite of the hamburger. "Never figured we'd have to drag the river to bring this one in."

Nick shrugged. "She panicked, Schank. And maybe if she really thought she was a vampire, she wouldn't have thought she would drown."

"Makes sense," Schanke mumbled, as if he ran across this sort of thing all the time.

"Yes, well, I am just glad that we can lay this nonsense about vampires to rest," Jonathan MacKensie commented, stirring his cup of tea.

"So to speak, Jon-Boy," Benedek said, grinning at his partner's unintentional pun. He was holding a plastic sundae dish of chocolate ice cream and energetically mixing in slices of raw garlic and turnip.

Schanke stopped chewing and eyed the concoction as Benedek lifted a spoonful to his mouth. "Is that stuff really good?"

"The best," Benedek proclaimed. "Wanna try some?" He proffered the bowl and spoon, an anticipatory smile lighting his impish face. He was foreverrazzing Jonathan about his boring food tastes and here was a potential new victim.

Nick and Jonathan exchanged glances, then looked at Schanke as he sampled the delicacy. Mutual expressions of disbelief and disgust crossed their faces.

The balding detective chewed thoughtfully for a moment, and was still valiantly holding on to his smile when Natalie entered, plunking a small stack of manila folders on Nick's desk. "Better watch it, Schank," she cautioned him, wrinkling her nose at the concoction. "If he's as much of an expert on nutrition as he is on vampires..." She held back a chuckle at Benny's

conspiratorial wink.

"Oh, no, Nat," Schanke began, "it's... it's..." Finally with a visible effort, he swallowed the bit he had taken with a grimace. "It's all yours, Benny."

The others laughed while Benedek grinned and shrugged, not at all offended by the hilarity.

* * * * *

"...so you see, Dr. Moorhouse, it was not a true paranormal situation," Jonathan explained in the office of his department head at Georgetown Institute.

"I must admit that's a surprise," Juliana Moorhouse said. "The preliminary reports certainly seemed to indicate vampirism."

"Nah, just a vampire wannabe," Benedek put in from his perch on the edge of her desk. He blinked at a framed photograph and picked it up. "Say, Dr. M, is that you on the end?"

She glanced over his shoulder. "Oh yes, that's my graduate class in archaeology at the University of Chicago."

"Check it out, Jonny," Benedek advised as he held it up.

Jonathan peered at the group of young men and women dressed in the clothing styles of the 1950s. He blinked and looked at it closer, then said tentatively, "Dr. Moorhouse, who's that man in the middle?"

She smiled fondly. "That was Professor Girard. He was a wonderful teacher -- most of the less-serious female students had crushes on him. I never did, of course."

"Of course," murmured Jonathan, catching Benedek's eye.

The man in the photo was the spitting image of Detective Nick Knight.

Benedek raised an inquiring eyebrow, and Jonathan shook his head, not wishing to pursue the matter. Some mysteries were best left unsolved...

Benedek set the photo down in its place and stood up. "Well, it's been real, Dr. M, but we've got to blow this pop stand--"

She was gazing thoughtfully at the photograph. "I admired Nicholas Girard a great deal. I felt very bad when he had to leave in 1954 because of the scandal. Something to do with the McCarthy hearings, I believe. I'd heard he went to Canada. No doubt had to change his name, too."

Benedek and Jonathan stared at her and then at each other.

"The Nick Knight we met could have been Girard's son," Jonathan said in a low voice to Benny as they left Moorhouse's office.

"Yeah, could have been," Benny agreed, knowing that Jonathan needed a logical and believable explanation to cling to. "Why don't I treat you to a brewski, Jon-Jon?"

Jonathan nodded, allowing Benny to propel him down the stairs and out into the sunlight.

Sunrise, Sunset
Cicatrice du Ventas

Is this the homeland of my people? Is this the house I left behind?
Ruins now. The pastures built to cities, from my time.
My parents' gone to dust for cent'ries, sisters and brothers' heirs have gone,
Scattering to the four winds at the dawn.

Sunrise, Sunset. Sunrise, Sunset.
Swiftly flies the time.
One era following another, revolving seasons in their prime.

Sunrise, Sunset. Sunrise, Sunset.
Swiftly fly the years.
Hist'ry is written by the victors. The vanquished have only truth for mirrors.

Is this the stuff of life eternal? Is this the promise of La Croix?
He told me there was time for learning, after all.
I was betrayed by his bright glamour. Janét said she would be with me.
I wouldn't tire of them in seven century.

Sunrise, Sunset. Sunrise, Sunset.
Decades fly so fast.
One era following another, the present growing from the past.

tune: *Sunrise, Sunset* by Jerry Bock



Stonetree showed Nick the fax that came in. It was a copy of an aggravated assault report, complete with photos of the victim after the attack. Nick grimaced. The woman's own mother probably hadn't recognized her in the hospital. Schanke looked over the report. He shook his head and put the papers back on the captain's desk.

Stonetree gave Nick the address. "We don't even know if Vasquez is in the city, but I'm putting you two on this now."

In the car, Schanke looked at the complainant's name. "Leigh Michaels -- I wonder..."

Nick glanced over at his partner. "You wonder what?"

"I just wonder if she's the same Leigh Michaels who wrote Forever Yours. It's one of those historical romances. Myra read it and gave me all the gory details."

Nick suppressed a grin, guessing that Schanke, himself, had skimmed more than a few pages. "Did she tell you the plot by any chance?"

"Yeah. It's one of those star-crossed lovers things. The heroine, Brigitte, is lost in a card game by her father when she's fifteen and forced to marry a real sadistic SOB named Victor. At the wedding she meets one of the neighboring plantation owners, Alain Devereaux, and it's love at first sight..."

Nick gripped the steering wheel so tightly that he felt it begin to bend as Schanke continued his synopsis of the novel. He knew this tale and all the little details Schanke overlooked because he had been told this story over a century and a half ago by the woman who lived it -- Brigitte Devereaux.

"...and, of course, Alain and Brigitte live happily ever after."

"Not quite," Nick muttered.

"What?"

"I said, it's the next house on the right." Nick parked the caddy and stared at the brightly lit house set back from the curb. When the front door opened, would he be greeted by a ghost from the past?

Schanke rapped on the hood of the car. "Come on."

Nick breathed a sigh of relief when an unfamiliar face peered out from behind a lacy curtain window. She opened the door after Schanke showed his badge. The detectives entered the house and introduced themselves.

"I'm Danielle Curtis. I filled your captain in on Cisco."

She led the way to the living room. "Leigh was pretty shaken by the call so I told her to go upstairs and try to rest."

"By 'Cisco', you mean Vasquez?" Nick asked as he watched the petite brunette cross the room.

"His full name is Francisco Enrique Vincent Vasquez de Portillo, but I always call him 'The Cisco Kid', mainly because it pissed him off."

Schanke took out his notepad. "Have you known him and Miss Michaels long?"

"Leigh and I grew up together back in the States. She met Cis -- Frank when she was a student at Pitt. I knew this guy was trouble from day one, but she wouldn't listen because he fit her dream man to a 't'."

Schanke looked up at her questioningly. "Dream man?"

Dani shrugged. "It sounds crazy, but when we were in high school, Leigh started having these weird dreams about some tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed guy who adored her and spoke with some kind of foreign accent."

"French," Nick mumbled absent-mindedly.

"What?" Dani asked.

"Nothing. Go on."

"Leigh put up with Frank's possessiveness and jealousy for about two years. Her breaking point came the night he slapped her around after she decided to move to Toronto when she graduated." She paused while Schanke took down the information.

"All Leigh could do was get a restraining order which did no good. Frank stalked her from afar until the day her friend from work gave her an innocent kiss on the cheek after driving her home. Frank broke into the apartment, tied her up and beat her so badly that she was in a coma for a month."

Schanke spoke, "Was Vasquez arrested?"

Dani shook her head. "No. The cops tried to bring him in for questioning but couldn't locate him, and by the time Leigh could identify him as her attacker, he had already skipped town."

"What exactly did Vasquez say when he phoned earlier?" Nick asked.

"He said that if I didn't go back to Spain with him, he'd kill me and take my corpse because I am his forever."

Nick turned and stared at the tall, attractive blonde who stood in the doorway. It was impossible and yet here she was not fifteen feet away -- the ghost of Brigette Devereaux.

Danielle gave Leigh her seat then introduced the detectives.

Schanke questioned her. "Were those his exact words, miss, that he would kill you?" Leigh nodded. "We can pick him up for questioning then notify the department back in Pittsburgh. If they have an outstanding warrant, he'll be extradited in no time."

"If you could find him," Leigh flatly said.

Nick forced himself to stop staring at her. "He'll be found. In the meantime, we'll have a patrolman stationed in the neighborhood, and we'll install a caller ID on your phone in the morning. Do you have an alarm system?"

Danielle frowned. "I've been on the waiting list since I closed on this place last month. The guy from Secur-Tech said that business is so heavy this year that it will be another three more weeks."

"We'll see about that," Schanke said as he put away his notepad. He asked to use the phone. He returned to the room a few minutes later. "Your system will be installed the day after tomorrow," the detective grinned. "And as a special favor, they're waiving the installation charge."

Nick now found himself to be the object of Leigh's staring. The hint of recognition in her olive-colored eyes made him uncomfortable. He stood up. "I think we have all the information we need."

He had taken two steps toward the door when Leigh called to him.

"Detective Knight, do you need a picture of Frank? I think I have a news article with a small photo. If you could help me move a few boxes in the cellar, I'll get it."

Nick hesitated but accompanied Leigh, unnerved by a feeling of *deja vu*. He pictured himself following her through the townhouse in New Orleans. Apart from the clothing, everything about her was the same -- the regal bearing, the golden highlights in her hair, and the deep-set eyes that seemed to look straight into his soul.

When they reached the basement, Leigh removed a yellowed news clipping from the pocket of her jeans. "I brought this from my bedroom because I thought you might need it." She gave Nick the paper. "I'm sorry for the ruse, but I had to see you alone for a minute." She paused and looked deep into Nick's eyes. "I was watching from my window when you arrived, and I recognized you as soon as you got out of your car because I've seen your face countless times in my dreams." She held Nick's left hand in both of hers. "I lived another life in another time and was once a vampire as you are now."

Before Nick had a chance to respond, Danielle called from the top of the stairs, "Can't you find it, Leigh?"

Leigh smiled warmly and caressed Nick's cheek before turning towards the stairs. "I have it. We were just on our way up."

* * * * *

Frank Vasquez stood deep in the shadows, watching the house where Leigh and the Curtis Bitch were entertaining their lovers. He transferred a large, smooth stone from hand to hand as he wondered how many men she'd had in the four years they had been apart. Leigh would deny it as she always did, but he had ways to get the truth out of her.

He stopped toying with the stone when the men left the house. Frank's anger began to rise when he saw the look -- the thoroughly satisfied look -- his Leigh had on her face as she gazed at the man in the leather trenchcoat. His grip on the stone tightened as he imagined Leigh and her lover engaged in various sexual acts.

The stone began to crack as Frank's thoughts turned to revenge. Leigh would pay for her infidelities. She was pay dearly.

Nick went home after the shift ended where he relived his past in his dreams.

He, Janette, and LaCroix arrived in New Orleans after escaping death at the hands of a group of vampire hunters. Nick kept to himself after that, feeling guilty that he had savaged their would-be attackers, yet knowing that he had no other choice. While on one of his solitary walks, he was overpowered by the scent of freshly spilled blood, and he followed it until he came upon a female lying in the street.

"Don't stand there watching the girl bleed to death, you fool! Get out of the way so that I may help her!"

Nick stepped aside and watched in admiration as the blond Creole deftly bound the injured prostitute's neck and facial wounds with strips torn from her petticoat, then she lifted the bleeding girl effortlessly and carried her in her arms as though she were a child.

Nick followed at a distance until they came to a makeshift hospital near the Rue Royale. He peered in the window and watched the blonde and an older, dark-skinned woman tend to the prostitute and other patients. Nick did not notice that the blond woman had come up behind him.

"Did you do that to Helena?"

Nick spun around. "Of course not. I just happened by..."

"And thought to help yourself to her blood," she hissed and bared her pointed canine teeth.

Nick stood his ground. "No, but if I chose to drink from her, it would have been to end her suffering, not for some perverse entertainment."

The woman gave Nick an appraising look before regaining her mortal-like composure. "I am Brigette Devereaux. Come. I would like to speak with you."

Nick liked Alain and Brigette Devereaux from the start. They understood his inner struggle between the vampire's need for blood and the guilt at having to take human life to survive.

"I chose this life to be with Alain and will do what is necessary to survive, even if it means playing God's role in deciding who should die and when," Brigette said to Nick one night at the little hospital where he was helping her. "Perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps our kind are damned for eternity. However, I prefer to believe that by helping those I can and by taking blood only from those who are beyond hope or whose sole desire is to inflict harm upon others that I am redeeming myself in some small, small way."

Nick felt a deep purpose to his existence as he helped Brigette with her patients. It brought him peace to minister to those whom others shunned for fear of contagion and to ease the misery of those terminally ill. He was especially comforted by his many talks with Brigette in which he shared the experiences of both his mortal and immortal lives. The recounting of events seemed to make the happy memories happier and the unhappy memories less painful. He knew that the same held true for Brigette.

Nick wanted nothing more than for the Devereauxs to continue as they had for so long -- in love with each other and safe in their corner of the mortal world. How he wished that Alain had never walked in on his conversation with LaCroix.

"We have been here far too long, LaCroix. The time has come to move on."

LaCroix smirked. He derided the Devereauxs behind their backs at every opportunity. "Move on so soon? Ha! Janette and I have taken a fancy to New Orleans."

"It isn't safe for so many of our kind to be in one place. Have you forgotten what happened two months ago? Brigette and Alain have shown us kindness, LaCroix. Let us not repay them by disturbing their peace."

"Nonsense, Nicholas," Alain Devereaux said as he entered from the balcony. "You have disturbed nothing. We have enjoyed your company. If you and your friends prefer not to be in the city, you are welcomed to stay at my plantation upriver." He looked a LaCroix. "All is asked in return is that you hunt with the same care you have shown here. The freed slaves who work Mont Clare for me are quite loyal, and I respect their lives as I would have them respect mine."

LaCroix beamed a false smile of friendship as he placed his arm around Alain's shoulders. "Thank you, Monsieur Devereaux. You have been a gracious host. Janette and I will accept your generous offer." He turned towards Nick. "What of you, Nicholas? Will you join us or will you stay here to minister to the wretched?"

Nick glared at LaCroix. "I will remain here."

LaCroix's reply was a smirk.

* * * * *

Although he woke later than usual, Nick felt physically drained. He was glad to be off duty this evening because he needed time to think. He went for a long drive then stopped at *The Raven*.

Janette was sitting alone at a table in the corner, staring down into the

half-empty glass before her. She looked up and smiled as Nick drew near. The smile faded as soon as he asked if she remembered Brigitte and Alain Devereaux. She returned her attention to the glass. "I remember them," she said flatly. "What of it?"

"Why, Janette?"

She looked up but did not answer.

"Why did you betray their trust?"

"I betrayed nothing. Devereaux told LaCroix not to hunt those at their plantation. We didn't."

Nick frowned. "You knew how they chose to feed. They didn't think it necessary to tell you to stay away from the neighboring plantation as well." He paused and looked at Janette staring into her glass again. He would not let her shut him out. "You and LaCroix killed their daughter and their family -- slaughtered them all in their beds."

Janette quickly drank the remaining blood in her glass as if to fortify herself against Nick's accusations. "I didn't know who they were until later." She looked at Nick; it was obvious he did not believe her. "It is the truth, Nicholas. I didn't carefully plan it or savor every drop of their blood. I only said those things because Brigitte attacked me and because you left me lying there while you went off to comfort her." She looked down at her empty glass and ran her fingertip around the rim. "I regretted it, especially after you left me and LaCroix and went off with them." Janette sighed. "Why are you bringing this up now? I can't change what happened, and I can't make amends."

Nick caressed Janette's cheek and tilted her head up to look into her eyes. "Perhaps you can make amends," he said quietly.

After leaving Janette, Nick drove through Leigh Michaels' neighborhood where he spoke to the officer on foot patrol. All had been quiet and no suspicious persons had been seen. Nick parked the caddy when he saw Danielle Curtis rush from the house with a small suitcase. She fumbled with her car keys and, after much foul language, managed to unlock the door, but not before turning off the car's alarm.

Nick silenced the alarm and dismissed the patrolman who came running. He grinned at Leigh when she came outside. "I should give her a speeding ticket, but I'm off duty."

Leigh laughed. "Dani isn't usually so reckless, but the guy who was promoted ahead of her made a major blunder in accounting, and she had to fly to England to straighten it out." Nick accepted her invitation to stay and visit awhile.

"It feels great to talk to someone who doesn't think I'm losing it. As far back as I can remember, I have always felt out of place, like I didn't belong with my family, but I didn't understand why until the dreams started. Dani thought my past life memories were just imaginary, and later when I came out of that coma, the doctors pushed it all aside because they didn't want to deal with anything so unscientific.

"I wrote *Forever Yours* because I needed to get it out in the open without getting all those 'there she goes again' looks."

Nick nodded. Keeping a part of oneself locked away was a difficult thing to live with. Natalie and Janette understood in some ways, but no one truly understood -- except Brigitte. "Do you have memories of Brig--, your death?"

Leigh nodded. "After we left you, we went on to Paris and had the great misfortune to run across Stephen Florescu at his wax museum, the *Musee du Mort*. He was a contemporary of LaCroix's so I suppose you've heard of him." She continued after Nick nodded. "For some reason, Alain was fascinated by the devil, and he, in return, fancied my husband. Unfortunately, I was in the way." Leigh got up and began to pace back and forth as she remembered. "Alain and I

had a terrible argument that ended with him leaving. Three nights later, I received a note..."

* * * * *

Brigette read the note for a third time.

Ma petite,

I have been a fool. As Maman Odette proclaimed, we were meant to be together always. I wish to make things right, cherie. Please come to the museum after closing.

Forever yours,

Alain.

She rose from the settee and paced back and forth, the note crumpled in her fist. The handwriting was Alain's and the words sounded like his, but Brigette was suspicious. Why a rendezvous at the Museum of Death instead of here?

The reason is in front of you, an inner voice replied.

Brigette stopped pacing and threw the note into the fireplace. She looked up at the framed child's drawing above the mantle. This was her answer. Alain would not come here because this house and its memories were a part of their problem. Brigette touched the drawing, tracing the lines with her fingertips. She remembered when her daughter, Anne Louise, drew it at the age of six. Though out of proportion and slight off-center, there was no mistaking what the picture represented. It was Alain and Anne walking hand in hand beneath a bright, full moon in front of this very house.

Brigette wiped the tears from her eyes. Anne Louise was gone, and she was responsible in Alain's mind. Brigette kissed her fingertips then touched them to the drawing of her daughter before setting out for the Musee du Mort.

Seeing Stephen and a mortal woman leave the museum without so much as a backward glance helped ease Brigette's fears, but only a little. It bothered her that Alain was not waiting in the lobby when she arrived. She entered and quietly called out to him. There was no reply, only a rustling sound from the direction of the exhibit area.

"Alain?" Brigette called again. Like before, there was no answer, only the sound of movement in the distance. She turned to leave but hesitated. Even with his heightened hearing, Alain might not have heard her from within the recesses of the cavernous museum. If she left now, she would surely lose him for all eternity, and she could not bear that.

Brigette pushed through the velvet hangings and walked quickly through the twisting exhibit area, keeping her eyes towards the floor. She disliked the gruesome tableaux depicting murders and executions and did not want to see them again, especially in the sputtering candlelight.

The door to Stephen's private room was ajar. The bright light from within was warm and inviting. The sound of footsteps crossing the thick rug brought a smile to Brigette's lips. She hurried through the threshold. "Alain--"

Brigette spun around as the chamber door slammed shut behind her. Stephen Florescu threw the bolt on the door. "Why, Madame Devereaux, how good of you to accept my invitation." Everything about him was black -- his velvet suit, his shoulder-length hair, his drooping mustache, and the eyes which mocked Brigette's gullibility.

Brigette stared at the vampire before her. "Where is Alain?"

Stephen laughed and crossed his arms in front of him. "He is no doubt

dining upon one of my workers. Didn't you see them when you arrived?" he asked innocently.

Brigette took a step back when her gaze fell on Stephen's distinctive red cloak that had a dried mud stain on the hem. The cloak she thought she saw him wearing a few minutes ago was spotless.

Her momentary distraction was all the chance Stephen needed. Brigette gasped as Stephen jerked her head back and sliced her throat. She fell to the floor, trying to stop the flow of blood with her left hand. With her right, she made a feeble attempt to recover the garnet necklace that had fallen.

Stephen kicked it out of reach and laughed as Brigette dragged herself toward it. He picked up the broken necklace and dangled it like a prize. He laughed as Brigette reached for it. She tried to pull herself forward again, but her arm slipped in the pool of blood. Stephen then threw the necklace into a far corner of the room. Brigette's anguished cry was nothing more than a gurgle.

"Poor Madame, you are in such distress. Let me put you out of your misery." With that, Stephen grabbed a lighted oil lamp from his desk and hurled it at Brigette's voluminous skirts. They ignited instantly.

Brigette silently screamed as the flames began to consume her. It was so very, very hot, so excruciatingly painful. She felt her skin begin to bubble and melt as the flames reached higher. She tried to close her eyes, but could not as her eyelids were gone, burned away. She prayed that the spurting blood from her neck wound would douse the fire, but it was too late.

Suddenly, the pain ceased, and Brigette found herself aloft. She looked down and saw only red-orange flames and thick dark smoke. The smell of roasting flesh was everywhere. Brigette looked up when a familiar voice called out to her. It was her dead twin, Louis who held out his hand. "Come, Brigette. You are done here."

Brigette took her brother's hand and shielded her eyes as a blindingly bright doorway opened behind him. Louis turned and began to lead Brigette through. Brigette stopped short of entering. She needed to go back down into the inferno, but Louis held fast. The corner where her necklace lay was not yet burning. She needed to get it, but still Louis would not let her go. "No, Brigette. I'm sorry."

Brigette kept her eyes on the glittering red stones as her brother pulled her through the light. She called to her husband, "I will find my way back to you, Alain. Please wait for me..."

* * * * *

Nick looked at Leigh as was reminded of Jeanne d'Arc, burned at the stake for a heresy she did not commit, and of Erica who chose to immolate herself in the rays of the sun when she tired of her life as a vampire. Had it been like that for them? Where were they now?

"Do you remember what happened when you entered the Light?"

Leigh shook her head. "No. I had a feeling that I'm not allowed to remember."

There was silence until Leigh noticed something on the floor behind the sofa. She picked up the small handbag, looked inside, then turned to Nick. "Dani's passport and insulin are in here, and I'll never get it to the airport in time."

Nick stood and held out his hand. "I can get it there -- air express."

* * * * *

Frank Vasquez's blood began to boil when he saw Leigh's latest lover exit the house. He reached down to remove the razor-sharp hunting knife he had concealed in his boot. He was stunned when he looked up a few seconds later and did not see the lover in his car or on the sidewalk. The man simply vanished.

Frank thought of his next move. Although he wanted to deal with Leigh's lover now, he would take care of Leigh's punishment first.

* * * * *

Nick landed behind some high hedges across from Leigh's house. From his left came the sound of the beat officer's walkie-talkie. He left the bushes but turned back when the patrolman did not respond and was called a second time. He found the officer lying unconscious and naked to the waist with a gash on his head, but it was not too serious. Nick radioed for backup, requesting that no sirens be used, then rushed to Leigh's. He crouched near the living room window and listened to pinpoint Leigh's and Vasquez's position in the house. There were no voices, and Nick prayed that Leigh was not already dead.

Nick closed his eyes for a moment and listened again. Now he could hear sounds from the opposite end of the house below ground level. He dug one of the barred windows free from its frame with his hands, then lowered himself through the opening. The only light was that of a single bulb across the basement where Vasquez was holding Leigh. The sound of fabric tearing was followed by Leigh's muffled cry and the accented voice of a man.

"You will always be mine. I'll show you what happens when you are unfaithful." Fabric tore again.

Nick inched around to see behind the partition that separated the laundry area from the rest of the cellar. Vasquez had Leigh standing on the table with her arms above her head, tied together and tethered to a ceiling beam while her legs were apart and tied to the table legs. Her clothing was nearly torn off, and blood trickled from beneath a cloth gag. Vasquez picked up a large wrench. "You won't have any more lovers when I'm through." He then pulled up Leigh's skirt and leered.

Nick took action. He drew his gun and stepped forward. "Drop it and back away, Vasquez. You're under arrest."

Frank dropped the wrench but spun around and threw his hunting knife straight at Nick's heart. Nick dodged the knife and was Vasquez in an instant. He bared his fangs and would have torn out Frank's throat if Leigh had not worked the gag free in time.

"Nicholas, no!"

Nick kept his hold on Frank while forcing his anger away, then he handcuffed Vasquez to one of the stabilizing legs of the clothes dryer before freeing Leigh. He gave her his jacket and comforted her while they waited for the backup officers to arrive.

* * * * *

Nick welcomed Leigh into the hotel suite with a broad smile. "Alain has been as nervous as a mortal schoolboy preparing for his first date."

Leigh tried to laugh, but her own nervousness prevented it. She took off her coat and set it on the sofa. Nick grasped her hands in his.

"Be happy." He kissed her gently, then left.

Leigh looked out the window. She turned around when she heard the connecting door to the bedroom open. The sight of the tall vampire in the doorway exiting frightened her. Her heart raced, and her mouth became dry. It was still hard to believe that she was with the man who had only been a picture

in her mind.

Hesitantly, she reached out, touching her trembling hand to the vampire's smooth cheek. Lovingly, she traced the familiar, handsome features with her fingertips. She ran her fingers through his thick black hair as she gazed deep into his brilliant blue eyes. "Alain, my Alain," she whispered.

When Alain enfolded her in his arms, Leigh clung to him, thrilled to be where she belonged at last.

* * * * *

Nick noticed the change in Leigh the moment she entered the squad room with Alain Devereaux. She crossed over and was now a vampire. He was happy for her and knew that his own world would be a little brighter with such a good friend in it once more.

Alain clasped Nick's hand. "Thank you, my friend, for bringing her back to me."

Nick smiled. "You're welcome, although I don't think I can take credit."

"Hey, Miss Michaels, it's nice to see you," Schanke said merrily as he walked over from the coffee station. He quickly ate the last few bits of his fourth doughnut.

Leigh smiled. "I just wanted to give you this before I left." She handed Schanke an autographed copy of her book.

The detective beamed. "So, where are you going? On vacation?"

"Sort of. I'm going to New Orleans with Alain to write my next book. It's a historical vampire novel. I'll be sure to send each of you a copy." Leigh kissed Schanke on the cheek and Nick on the lips. "Goodbye, and thank you -- for everything."

Nick knew she was referring to his having Janette locate Alain. He acknowledged that with a nod of his head and a smile. He returned to his desk when Alain and Leigh left.

Schanke looked out of the window and watched the couple get into a waiting taxi before sitting at his own desk. "That guy with Miss Michaels was familiar, but I can't place him. Did she say his name was Alain?"

Nick imagined the wheels turning in Schanke's head. "Uh huh, Alain Devereaux." He looked up and grinned as his partner's jaw dropped.

"But, but--" Schanke gestured to the book on his desk.

Laughing, Nick turned back to his work. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Schank..."

Petit Vampire Lacroix

à la Martha Prince et Cicatrice du Veritas

Le petit vampire Lacroix vole à travers la forêt.

Il empoigne les paysans et les suce à sec.

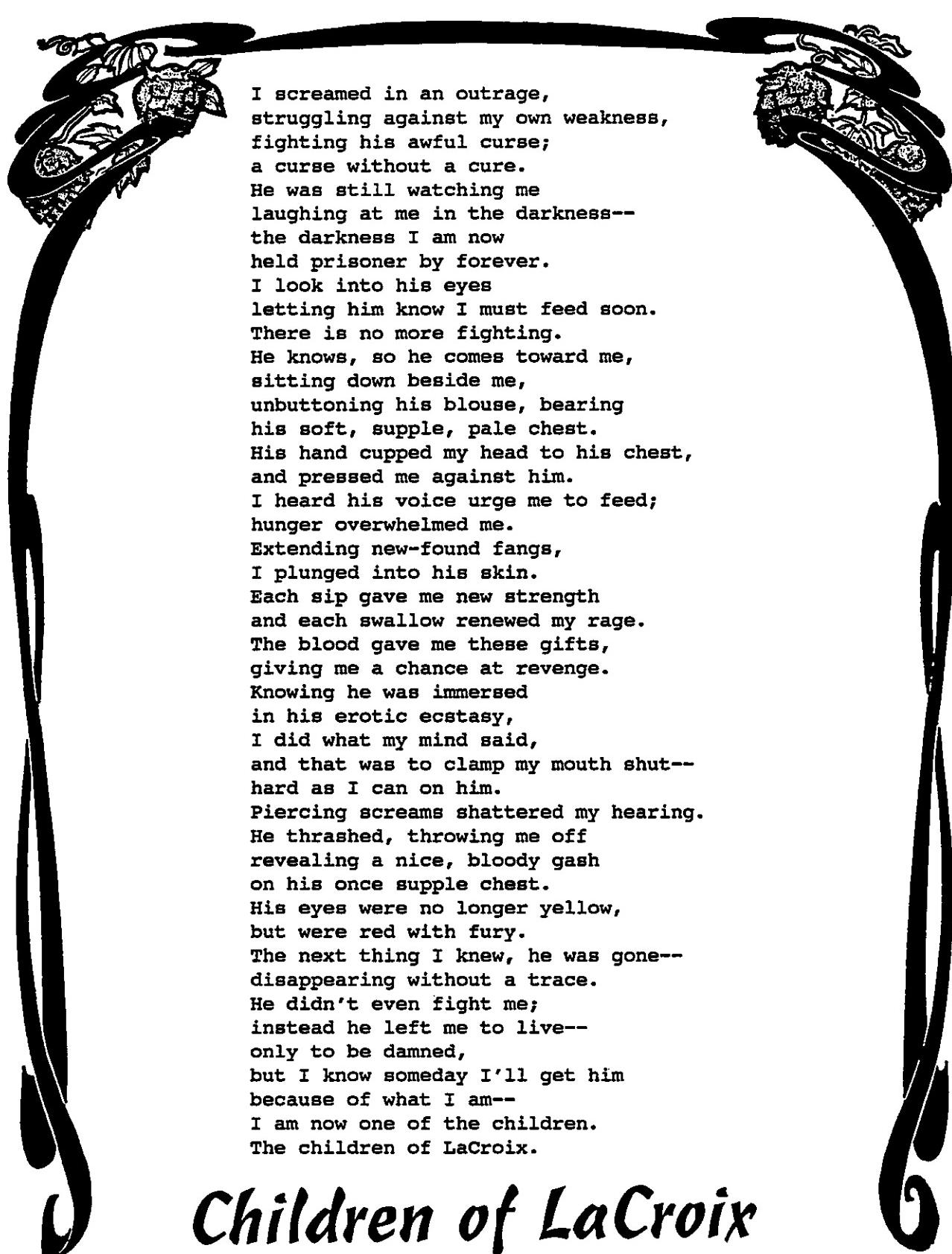
Et le bon Nicolas dit: "Maître Lacroix,

je ne désire pas empoigner les paysans pour les sucer à sec."

Children of LaCroix

*Part 1
by Lisa Jachymiak*

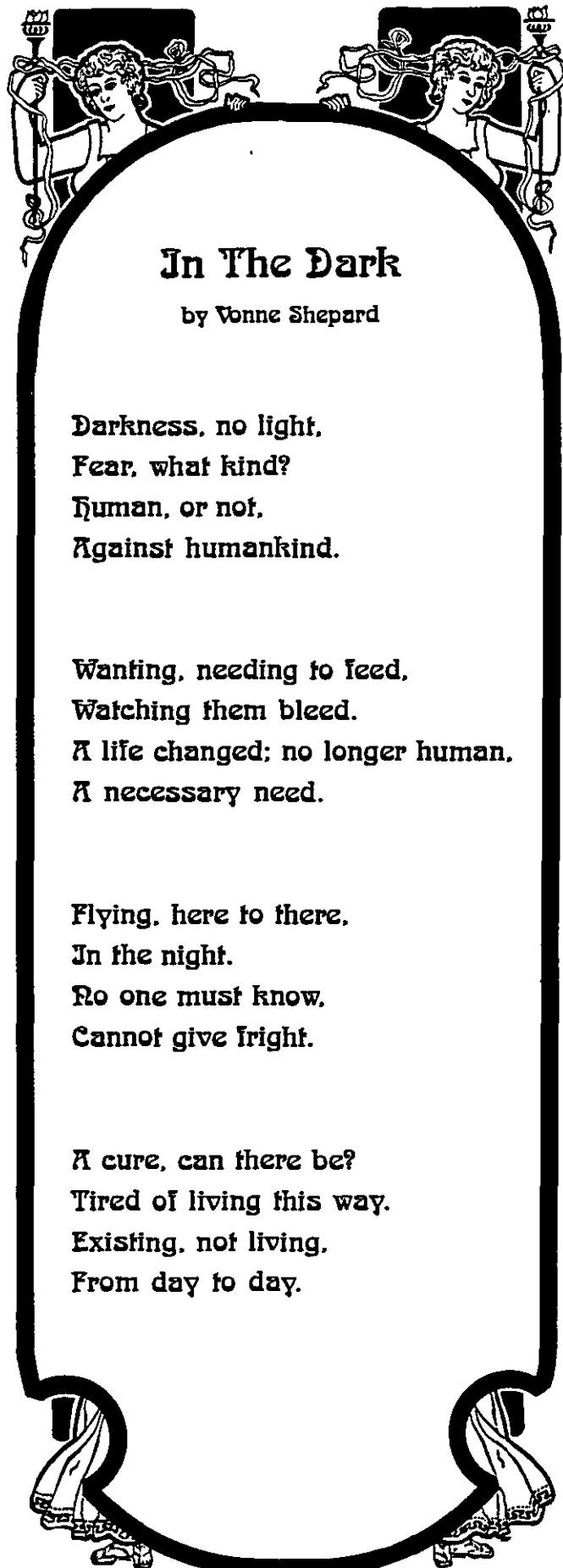
A distant clock tower drones
away the midnight hour
telling my soul to rest in peace
and free the dreams within.
The cool, moist air from the window
flows in around my body,
sending a shiver to my bones.
I was lifted
by something cold and powerful.
My tired eyes drew open
and terror struck me in the heart.
I looked into a face
that was devoid of life and shade,
except for the sharp fangs
and burning, glowing, yellow eyes.
I tried to scream for help,
but felt the prick upon my neck.
Blood satisfied hunger.
Each pounding pulse gave renewed strength.
Then he stopped, backed away.
The blood dripping from his lower lip.
I reached forward for him
with whatever strength I had left,
but he only laughed.
Now I know what he had 'just done--
he had brought me across.



I screamed in an outrage,
struggling against my own weakness,
fighting his awful curse;
a curse without a cure.
He was still watching me
laughing at me in the darkness--
the darkness I am now
held prisoner by forever.
I look into his eyes
letting him know I must feed soon.
There is no more fighting.
He knows, so he comes toward me,
sitting down beside me,
unbuttoning his blouse, bearing
his soft, supple, pale chest.
His hand cupped my head to his chest,
and pressed me against him.
I heard his voice urge me to feed;
hunger overwhelmed me.
Extending new-found fangs,
I plunged into his skin.
Each sip gave me new strength
and each swallow renewed my rage.
The blood gave me these gifts,
giving me a chance at revenge.
Knowing he was immersed
in his erotic ecstasy,
I did what my mind said,
and that was to clamp my mouth shut--
hard as I can on him.
Piercing screams shattered my hearing.
He thrashed, throwing me off
revealing a nice, bloody gash
on his once supple chest.
His eyes were no longer yellow,
but were red with fury.
The next thing I knew, he was gone--
disappearing without a trace.
He didn't even fight me;
instead he left me to live--
only to be damned,
but I know someday I'll get him
because of what I am--
I am now one of the children.
The children of LaCroix.

Children of LaCroix

Part 2
by Lisa Jachymiak



In The Dark

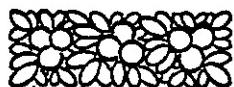
by Vonnie Shepard

**Darkness, no light.
Fear, what kind?
Human, or not,
Against humankind.**

**Wanting, needing to feed.
Watching them bleed.
A life changed; no longer human.
A necessary need.**

**Flying, here to there.
In the night.
No one must know.
Cannot give bright.**

**A cure, can there be?
Tired of living this way.
Existing, not living.
From day to day.**



Walking in Darkness

by Vonne Shepard

*He walks in darkness,
Through the night.
Unable to tolerate,
The daytime light.*

*Wanting to be human,
His wish to be.
And from his present life,
To be free.*

*Violence through the centuries,
Violence he has seen.
Now he fights the violence,
On the streets that are mean.*

*Working as a policeman,
Fighting the crime.
Working through the night,
Afraid of the daytime.*

*Keeping his secret,
Working all alone.
Hoping for a cure,
And his evilness to atone.*





(Entrance to the Spanish Inquisition exhibit at the museum.)

Guard 1: This whole set up gives me the creeps.

Guard 2: You don't mind the Egyptian wing.

Guard 1: Those are all fake. These are authentic items. Look at all the alarms they have installed. They almost couldn't get the insurance for the showing. I am sure you can still find traces of blood and human flesh on those rusted racks.

Guard 2: Stop it! I just finished my sandwich.

Guard 1: We still have to clock with the timer all the way down the other end of the hall.

How was the Grateful Dead concert last night?

Guard 2: It's okay. It's so Seventies.

Guard 1: They have been around longer than you have been around. That was rock and roll.

Guard 2: What's that sticking out from the iron maiden?

Guard 1: It certainly wasn't there before.

Guard 2: You open it. No guts, no glory.

Guard 1: I have plenty of guts, my wife keeps reminding me. Beside, glory is for young rebels like yourself.

Guard 2: Is this a dead body?

Guard 1: On no, not again. I left the morgue to get away from the bodies.

Guard 2: So this is a dead body. It looks fresher than your salad tonight.

* * *

Stonetree's office/night)

Stonetree: Nick, you better have a good excuse for requesting to be removed

from this case.

Nick: Conflict of interest and past personal involvement.

Schanke: Captain, can't you see he's sick? He's as pale as death itself the moment he stepped through those dungeon doors.

Stonetree: Dungeon doors?

Schanke: You know the entrance to the Spanish Inquisition exhibit at the museum. It was creepy with those flickering torches outside the doors to hell.

Stonetree: We were talking about Nick.

Schanke: Right. As soon as we walked through the doors, Nick just turned white and took off to the can.

Stonetree: Are you okay now?

Nick: Schanke can solve this case all by himself. I just want to go home.

Stonetree: Go see a doctor. You might be coming down with the flu or something.

Schanke: Natalie is a doctor, even if all her patients are cold and very dead.

(Nick smiles sarcastically at them.)

* * *

(Flash back/Sunlit, richly decorated castle chamber)

(A young, curly-haired Nick is packing his battle gears. He is very excited. Brother Philip enters and waves the squires to leave.)

Nick: Come to bless me, Brother Philip?

Brother P.: Come to talk some sense into you. I thought I had taught you better than this.

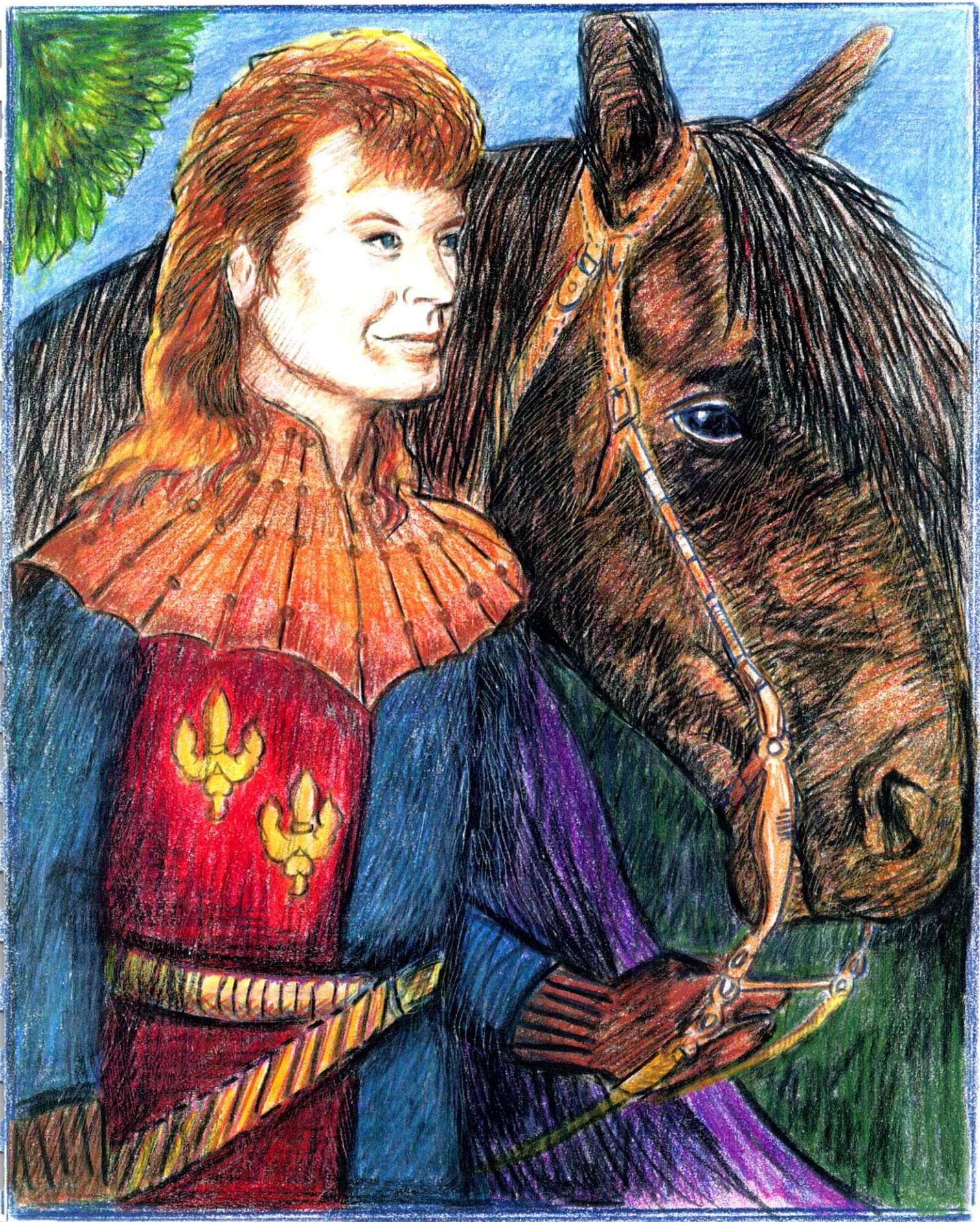
Nick: I don't understand.

Brother P.: This Crusade is not holy. This is a mission designed by men, not by God. He teaches love thy neighbors and tolerance. This crusade is a self-righteous fools' errand.

Nick: They are savages.

Brother P.: Who are we to judge them?

Nick: How would you know? You have never been there.



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Brother P.: Nor have you.

Nick: Don't let the bishop hear you say such a thing. He might burn you for heresy.

Brother P.: God is my only judge. Come and pray with your old teacher for the last time in the chapel. You may not return alive, or when you do, I may be with God.

(As they leave the chamber, Brother Philip takes a wooden cross from under his robe. He blesses the cross and hangs it around Nick's neck.)

Brother P.: The cross which I promised a long time ago.

Nick: You never make promises.

Brother P.: I used to when I was young. The cross is made from the wooden sword you broke when we first met.

Nick: I was a child then.

Brother P.: You will always be a child to me.

* * *

(Nick's home.)

(Nick looks at an old scar on his left arm when Natalie comes through the door. He quickly pulls the sleeve down.)

Nick: Why do I get a feeling this is not a social call?

Natalie: So, Schanke worries. He asks me to look in on you.

Nick: I'm fine now.

Natalie: No, you ain't.

Nick: It's amazing how the language deteriorated. I thought Canadian French was bad; North American English is even worse.

Natalie: You're changing the subject.

Anyway, thought you might want to see the pictures since you never made it through the doors. Actually, the body was only slightly burned, certainly not enough to kill him. Strange thing is that the body is very fresh as if he just died, but the body is at room temperature. Then how can his clothes be old enough for carbon dating? Unless someone put the clothes on him.

(Nick's mouth drops open after he scans halfway through the stack of black and white photos.)

Nick: Where is he now?

Natalie: Coroner Building. We will start on him tomorrow.

Nick: I need to see that he is dead with my own eyes.

Natalie: You know him?

Nick: I thought he was burned to a crisp along with his castle.

Natalie: I thought castles were made out of stones.

Nick: Castles are not made one hundred percent out of stones. Castles do burn. That's how we escaped. I'll show you how when I have a hundred years to spare.

Natalie: Am I missing a chapter of your life?

Nick: Just the Spanish Inquisition.

Natalie: He is one of you?

Nick: He nearly wiped us out. Since we travel in packs, like a pod of whales, that make us an easy target.

Natalie: You guys don't due that easily. What was he trying to accomplish? Establish the pain threshold of an average vampire?

Nick: Nothing that simple. The so-called purpose of his crusade was to find the worthy few immortals to join him in his conquest of the then known world.

Immortality is not all it's cracks up to be.

His death must fit his transgressions. Since he must be in a coma, the best way to wake up as vampire would be with the glorious sunlight. Then we'll see what happens next to suit our fancies.

Natalie: Are we talking revenge?

Nick: No, justice for all those who died in agony because of him. The ancients described life as a cycle. I was too damned close to the center to realize the true length of the circle.

Natalie: I know you ended the last cycle with a fire; don't even think of burning down the coroner building in order to end this cycle. I am rather attached to that place. Are you sure it is him?

(Nick shows Natalie a specific photo.)

Nick: See that marking around his neck? He used to wear a gold chain like that. It must have been burned into his flesh. Let's go and visit your ice box.

Natalie: I resent that.

* * *

(Hallway of Coroner Building.)

Schanke: Nice of you to drop by. You still look just as bad, Nick. Nat, you were supposed to check in on him, not take him out on a date.

Nick: So I feel guilty shuffling the case to my partner. I feel much better now. Let's go to work.

Schanke: You are too late. Someone stole the body and killed the guard two hours ago. Same M.O. as the first case we worked on together. Remember the two puncture marks on the neck, no blood, and a stolen jade goblet? Come to think of it, it's the same museum.

Natalie: They did the autopsy on the guard already?

Schanke: Hard not to. He was all stretched out on the table already and stripped of all his clothes down to his socks.

Nick: Where is the guard now?

Schanke: Room Three.

(Nick and Nat rush down the hallway, leaving Schanke behind.)

Schanke: He is dead; he is going nowhere.

* * *

(Room Three.)

Quincy Jr.: Who is your friend, Nat?

Nick: Nick Knight from Homicide.

Quincy Jr.: The guard is still warm, and they already assigned two detectives to the case. Never heard of you guys work so fast before.

Nick: Schanke is on the extra crispy case from the museum. I'm on the guard.

Quincy Jr.: Here are my handwritten notes. Read away, pal. Well I got things to do, places to go, midnight snacks to eat. See you later. Just leave the notes on the table over there.

Nick: Someone went through a great deal of effort to hide the Count for all these centuries. His followers? Unlikely, there weren't that many of them left after the fire. The rest were taken care of. He will need more blood soon to feed his hunger.

He was demented even before he was brought over by LaCroix. If the rest ever finds out LaCroix was responsible for the conversion of the worst mass murderers of immortals of all time, LaCroix will be the next one on the lynch mob's list.

Natalie: If the count was so unstable, why did LaCroix bring him over?

Nick: A personal demonstration of his power as master. Time and time again I went back to him. Our relationship was, to use a modern shrink's term, abuser and abused type of bond. LaCroix sometimes saw himself as a god, a savior. He had the power of taking or granting a life.

Natalie: Making someone an immortal is not giving life. He merely extended life.

(Schanke comes in and removes the sheet covering the guard's face.)

Schanke: Same M.O. I told you.

Nick: Schanke, why don't you solve your own case?

Schanke: If you haven't noticed, it's too much of a coincidence. My extra crispy friend just so happened to be stolen the same time the guard was killed. They are related.

Natalie: I don't know about you, people, but I am going home. Need a lift, Nick?

Nick: No. I have some old unfinished business to take care of. It's just around the corner.

(Nick gives Natalie a tight squeeze on her hand and whispers to Natalie.)

Nick: You know what to do if I don't contact you within two weeks.

(Natalie smiles weakly before leaving the room.)

Schanke: You still look pale. Make sure you see a doctor before tomorrow night. Myra will kick me out of the bedroom if I catch anything.

Nick: I'll try to remember. Good night, partner.

(Nick leaves the room. Schanke looks at the uncovered face.)

Schanke: I know I am right; we are working on the same case.

* * *

Janette: Stop it, Nick. He is dead. His castle was burned down along with him in it. You are only torturing yourself with the memory of the Count.

Nick: You have no idea of the meaning to the word.

Janette: Stop it. Just because I escaped early with LaCroix, I lost friends to the Count, too. I will set up the meeting for tomorrow night as you asked. Are the Enforcers invited?

Nick: They screwed up the job last time. No thanks.

Janette: They won't like it.

(Nick kisses Janette on her lips and leaves.)

* * *

(Flash back)

(Courtyard)

(A young lad is given a wooden sword by the castle's steward. The child immediately starts to thrust the sword into a hay stack by the door. The man watches for a while then goes indoors. A black hound wanders closer to the boy with wagging tail. The boy drops the sword to hug the door. The dog returns the affections by licking his face. The child chuckles, then picks up the sword and proceeds to thrust at the dog. The hound backs away after taking several hits. The child backs into an old man in brown robe after he breaks the wooden sword on the side of the well.)

Brother P.: The beast did you no harm. Do not hurt the dog again.

Nick: Who are you?

Steward: He is our new friar, Brother Philip.

Brother P.: As my first gift to you, I will make a cross out of this broken sword. Let me tell you a story why a sword is no match against faith.

* * *

(Back room of the Raven)

Nick: Janette, you better do the talking. I was never trained for public speaking.

Janette: You will do just fine. They may not like you, but they do fear you. To them you are unpredictable.

(Janette signals for the lights to be turned down.)

Janette: This meeting is called by Nicholas.

Nick: Some of you were with me in Spain during the Inquisition...

The crowd starts to boo Nick.)

Janette: No refreshments will be served until Nick finishes.

The crowd quieted down.)

Janette: (Whispers to Nick) Primitive but effective.

Nick: Two nights ago, a partially burned body was found in the Spanish

Inquisition exhibit at the museum. I believe the body belongs to the Count who killed so many of us centuries ago.

Shouter: We don't leave remains behind.

Nick: I know. The burning was not bad enough even to kill a mortal, let alone an immortal.

Woman: I was with Nicholas during the Count's reign of terror. My wounds did not heal for a day. If somehow he survived and is back for more of his crazy holy war, I am with Nicholas. We cannot do nothing and hope the Count will go away.

Young Punk: He is not one with us anymore. Why should we listen to him? If the body does turn out to be the Count, it's the Enforcers' job.

Old Man: Shut up, kid. You don't know what fear is. There were three choices: One, pledge your allegiance with the Count and wait for the Enforcers to kill you for breaking the Codes. Two, don't pledge your allegiance with the Count, and the Count himself will kill you. Three, pray you will last long enough for more Enforcers to come to your rescue.

Nick: Last time we waited, six Enforcers never returned. And we ended up with our version of the Spanish Inquisition. For those of you who question my fear, go to the exhibit and see for yourself firsthand. They are opened late on weekends.

Young Punk: You survived.

Nick: Most of us did not. (*Whispers to Janette*) When was he brought over?

Janette: Too recently. Problem with youth these days, they have no respect for anyone over five hundred.

Nick: Why are we trying to forget and hide what he and his followers had done to us? Those of us who survived seldom talk about it. When we do, it is in whispers as if the Enforcers overhear. Those who were not there or joined us afterward think the Inquisition is a myth. It happened.

(Nick takes a deep breath, and almost takes the glass of blood offered by Janette's extended hand.)

Janette: Now it is up to them.

Nick: First we need to find him.

Janette: I will let you know if I hear anything. Be careful, the Enforcers may start hunting for you, too, for crossing them.

Nick: I don't care.

* * *

(Stonetree's office/same night)

Stonetree: Where have you been, Nick?

Nick: Chasing dead leads. So what did I miss?

Schanke: Just the Spanish Inquisition. I went to the library and the museum for some research. You know those stuff they have there are genuine pieces? They used to belong to the estate of Count something. According to the history, he was a well-loved guy. One night someone torched his castle with him and his family in it.

Nick: History can be wrong. Some of my ancestors barely escaped from the Count with skin intact.

Schanke: Apparently, someone has been sending hate mail to the sponsors of this exhibit for violating his/her ancestor's good name.

Stonetree: Frankly, I don't care much for the body found in the museum. Until the body turns up, there is no case. The guard's murder is your first priority. Both of yours.

Schanke: You mean I did all that research for nothing? I still think the extra crispy and the guard in the morgue are related.

Nick: At least you know more about the Spanish Inquisition.

Stonetree: That's all, people.

Schanke: I am going home.

Police: Knight, phone call. Line Three.

Nick: Coming.

(Schanke picks up his coat and yells good night. Nick picks up his phone.)

Nick: Detective Knight speaking... Slow down, I will be there in a minute.

(He picks up his leather jacket and dashes out the door.)

Stonetree: I hope that was a lead.

* * *

(Dark alleyway behind the Raven.)

Janette: Where is Nick?

Young Punk: He is a cop.

Janette: He is one of us.

(Nick lands behind the punk.)

Nick: Hi, kid. Shouldn't you be in bed by now? It is way past your bedtime.

Young Punk: I am not a kid.

Janette: Our regular food supplier just dropped our account like a cross.

Young Punk: He said we stole enough supply to fill a bath tub.

Nick: What is the address and name of your supplier?

Janette: He won't talk to the police.

Nick: I won't tell him I am a cop. Does he know why you need expired human blood?

Janette: We pay him enough not to ask questions.

Young Punk: He is inside now.

Nick: Lead the way.

* * *

Harry: No, not you. First I get ripped off, then you.

Nick: Long time, no see.

Janette: Acquaintance of yours?

Nick: Busted him a couple of times for being stupid. Harry?

(Nick sits down next to him.)

Harry: There is nothing wrong with what I sell.

Nick: Just scalping.

Harry: They gave me an offer, it's not polite not to counter-offer.

Nick: How much blood was stolen?

Harry: Like I said before, enough to fill a bathtub, a big one. The insulated door was just ripped open like cardboard.

Nick: Take me to where you stored the blood.

Harry: I didn't report this to the cops.

Nick: Tonight is your lucky night. It's my night off.

Young Punk: Why steal so much blood? By the time you get to the last drop, it's stale.

(Janette pulls Nick to one side.)

Janette: The blood is not for feeding. It's for healing, as in submerging in Holy Water.

Nick: It is a myth. No one knows if it really works. To submerge a whole body completely you will need a very big tub. Swimming pool, coffin... or a stone coffin... like those in the museum.

Janette: I know who is responsible for this mess.

Nick: This is more than a mess. Inquisition Two is already on its way.

Janette: Alyce Hunter stole the blood.

Nick: Alyce is dead. LaCroix killed her... I'm not sure anymore, I was so weak that night. I don't remember much.

(Nick paces the room.)

Why didn't she come to me?

Janette: She wasn't thrilled when you refused her. It's very possible that Alyce is attempting to resurrect the Count for her hobby.

Nick: So she is still at the museum. You are coming with me to find her.

Janette: The sun will be out by the time we leave the museum. We know where the Count is. It's the Enforcers' job now.

Nick: Now.

(Nick grabs Janette's arm and drags her out with him. The young punk tries to stop them. Nick shows his teeth to the young punk as a warning. The young punk backs off.)

Janette: Get the Enforcers and meet us at the museum.

Young Punk: I need a drink.

Harry: May I have one, too?

Young Punk: You don't want what I'm having. Go, get lost. We will contact you later.

Harry: We are still in business together?

Young Punk: You are the only supplier in town. Get lost before I change my mind.

* * *

(Closed wing of the museum.)

(Nick stands over a six foot long, gray marble coffin half-filled with blood. Janette looks uneasy.)

Nick: Where is the Count now?

Janette: We need more people for this hunting party. I don't want to find myself face to face with that nut case.

Nick: Call her, Janette.

Alyce: I am here. No need to shout, Nick.

Nick: Alyce, why didn't you come to me?

Alyce: You live in the present. I prefer to live in the past. Your quest is to become human. My quest is to discover history.

Nick: Janette, I will talk to you about this later.

Janette: I respect her privacy.

(Nick dares not to take his eyes off Alyce.)

Alyce: Janette, may I talk to Nick alone?

Janette: I'll take that as an invitation to leave. This is the last time I'll do any favor for either of you.

(Janette leaves. Alyce runs her fingers along the inside of the blood-filled stone coffin, licks her fingers with an approving smile.)

Alyce: Are you going to arrest me for the killing of the guard?

Nick: Did you kill him?

Alyce: I caught the guard for the Count.

Nick: That was stupid. Where is the Count now?

(Janette flies back, almost knocking Nick over.)

Janette: He is alive; the Count is alive.

Alyce: Where have you been?

(A middle-age man, wrapped in some antique cloth from the Spanish Inquisition, walks into the dark room after Janette.)

The Count: I am a Count. I need to dress for my rank. I want my family insignia ring.

Alyce: It is with the rest of the exhibition. I'll show you.

Janette: Nick? Now is a good time to be a hero.

Nick: Like what? I neither have a sword for decapitation nor a wooden stick for his heart.

Count, the Enforcers are on their way. If you are in the way, Alyce, they will kill you, too.

Alyce: Be seeing you, Nick, Janette.

Nick: Alyce, before you shackle up with this blue blood, bone up your history on the Spanish Inquisition. You will find it very bloody. See this scar here.

(Nick pulls up his sleeve and exposes his scar. They run the length of his forearm and under his shirt and onto his upper arm.)

We do not scar.

The Count: Your visions are so narrow. You do not see what I see. A world that is full of mortals for me to rule. You can join us. I would have asked you, Janette, to rule by my side if you did not run away with that spineless LaCroix. Now, Alyce will rule by my side. Of course, I have no objection to having both of you.

Janette: You are sick!

Danny: (Waving his flashlight in the dark.) Who's there?

(The Count grabs the guard by the neck and starts to feed. Nick flies over, trying to yank the Count off the already unconscious guard. But the Count is much stronger than Nick. The Count flunks the half-dazed Nick into the blood-filled coffin.)

The Count: When was the last time you fed?

(He climbs into the coffin to feed on Nick's blood. Janette tries to push one of the two steel supports of the stone coffin out of its place to lock the Count in. She only manages to dislodged one support despite her vampire strength. The count extends his hand and clamps it around Janette's throat. Janette struggles with the Count's strong grip. After a moment of hesitation, Alyce moves in to push the remaining support. With a thundering crash, the lid comes down on the Count's neck and arm. The Count's head lands on the cement floor. The dismembered arm still holds on to Janette's throat. The body lies still inside the coffin with Nick screaming loudly inside.)

Alyce: More guards will come. We can't be seen.

Janette: Nick is still inside. We can't leave him.

Alyce: We can get him out later.

Janette: The police will hear Nick screaming from inside the coffin, and it will take them hours to open the cover. No mortal can survive without air.

(Young Punk arrives alone.)

Janette: Where are the Enforcers?

Young Punk: The Enforcers themselves are waiting to come as a group.

Janette: Cowards.

Alyce: We will try to make a crack big enough for air to get in.

(With much effort, the three of them manage to jam one of support bars between the lid and the coffin itself. Nick would be heard hyperventilating inside the coffin.)

Alyce: Nick, are you okay? The police will be here. We have to go.

Nick: Just open this and let me out of here.

Janette: We can't. We can barely lift the lid. They certainly knew how to make a coffin back then.

(Voices are heard coming from the hall.)

(Same two guards who find the burned body in the iron maiden.)

Guard 1: Where is Danny? This is his wing. Why are we even here?

Guard 2: The director wants us to keep an eye open after that body was found in the Spanish Inquisition wing. Turn on the light, will you?

(Light comes on.)

Guard 1: Shoot, the director is not going to like this at all.

Guard 2: Like what?

Guard 1: That. *(Points at the blood head and arm on the floor in front of the stone coffin.)*

Nick: *(Yells loudly from inside the coffin)* Get me out of here!

(Both guards take off.)

* * *

(Half an hour later and a roomful of people.)

Stonetree: Will someone tell me how Nick managed to get himself stuck inside a stone coffin with a dismembered body?

Schanke: According to the museum guard...

Stonetree: How much long before they can get him out?

Fire Chief: We need to get the heavy equipment from the other side of the City. It takes time. Does your man have a heart condition or something?

Schanke: How would you like being stuck inside a coffin with a headless body as a bedmate?

(Fire Chief drifts off.)

Natalie: I finally got Nick to calm down. I gave him some sedative with his water.

Stonetree: How long will he sleep?

Natalie: Not long enough.

Stonetree: Now that Nick has stopped screaming, tell me more.

Schanke: We don't have much. A guard named Danny came in here to check out voices that he heard. Someone knocked him out. Later, two guards heard a crashing sound. They came in and found Nick inside the barely opened stone coffin with the head and arm on the floor.

Stonetree: Anything from Nick?

Natalie: He doesn't even know what his name is.

* * *

(Dream/Windowless castle chamber.)

Thirteen lit candles form a cross on the stone floor. A long-haired Nick and a long, loose-haired Janette are dancing around the flames. The dance is interrupted when Brother Philip pulls open a tapestry to let in the morning sun. He smiles and signals Nick to join him in the sunlight. Nick approaches the monk, but Janette tries to woo him back into her arms and the shadows. Nick breaks loose from Janette and sits on the floor next to the monk in the warm rays of the rising sun. A servant girl who looks like Natalie steps from the shadow into the light with a wooden tray full of breads, wine, cheese, french fries, and catsup. Nick pours a goblet of wine, breaks the bread, and takes the food and drink into the darkness for Janette. Just as Janette is about to take the food and drink into her hands, LaCroix knocks them out of Nick's hands and onto the stone floor. Nick ignores LaCroix, returns into the sunlight and pours a goblet of wine for "Natalie".

* * *

(Sometime later.)

Natalie: Nick, drink this water, please. (Drops a small plastic bottle into the coffin.)

Nick: No. You put something in the last bottle of water I drank.

Natalie: If I had not, you would be completely unglued by now. Drink it. All right, I will sing to you. Richard always came into my room when he couldn't sleep. Know which song put him to sleep the quickest?

Nick: Now I doubly want to get out of here.

(Natalie sings.)

Schanke: Have faith, my friend. We will get you out soon enough.

(Both Natalie's singing and Schanke's voice fades into the background.)

* * *

(Flash back.)

(Same courtyard where the young Nick first meets Brother Philip. The sky is darkening and the now grown, long-haired Nick holds the body of Brother Philip in his arms in the warm summer rain.)

Young Man: Nick, let them take the body away. You did the right thing in the name of the Church. You spared him the agony of the flame. He is with God now.

Nick: During the Crusade, I killed for the Church. This time I killed in defiance of the Church. A man like him should have died in his bed or as a martyr. Since the Church would not let him die a natural death, I made sure he died as a martyr. He is my martyr now.

Young Man: Come inside with me, Nick. You have to prepare for the banquet in honor of your safe return from the Crusade.

Nick: This is no time to celebrate.

Young Man: Then you can get drunk. I heard a lady name Janette will join us tonight.

Nick: Brother Philip said, "Have faith, my friend," to me before those guards dragged the dying old man out of his bed. He held on from entering the heavens' gate just so he could see me one last time.

Young Man: Let them take the body away, please.

(Nick reluctantly lets the servants remove the body from his arms. He removes the wood cross from around his neck and places the cross into the stiffened fingers of his teacher.)

* * *

Natalie: Drink the water, Nick. Please.

Nick: I want to get out of here as soon as I can.

Engineer: All right, people. Doctor and Schanke, stay here. The rest of you, move back. You, too, Fire Chief. Each of you grab one arm and help him out. Don't yank him; we don't need to dislocate his shoulders.

Nick: It's wide enough. I can climb out.

Natalie: Let us help.

Nick: Natalie, I am going to come flying out.

(The crane slowly raises the lid. As soon as the crack is wide enough, Nick flies past them like a bat out of hell. Nick unbuttons his blood-soaked shirt while running into the men's room down the hallway. Natalie tries to follow Nick into the men's room, but Schanke stops her at the door.)

Schanke: I don't trespass into the ladies' room. Whatever happened to equality?

Natalie: I am a doctor!

* * *

(Nick's home.)

Nick: Where is Alyce?

Janette: She left town. The Enforcers scared the living moonlight out of her. They let her go because I never told her about the history of the Count. She asked me to give this to you. Maybe it's time to change our intro courses of "Being Vampire: Past History and How to Survive".

(She gives Nick a sealed letter and a silk pouch. Nick rips open the envelope and reads the letter, then opens the pouch. It is the jade goblet from the museum.)

Nick: I want to be alone now.

Janette: Don't disappoint yourself.

(Natalie comes through the door as Janette leaves.)

Janette: I wouldn't stay too long. (To Natalie.) I wouldn't have abandoned Nick if I had a choice.

Natalie: I know.

(Janette leaves.)

Nick: No, you would not have abandoned your playmate.

Natalie: How are you? Did you steal the goblet from the museum?

Nick: No, Alyce did. She knew the alarm system inside-out. It's Alyce's way of saying "Till we meet again".

Natalie: Alyce Hunter, the woman from the museum? She is dead?... Oh no, she is one of you now.

Nick: She left town already.

Natalie: Want to talk about it?

Nick: No.

Natalie: I will leave if you want me to.

Nick: No, let's have dinner. I even have food for you.

Natalie: Chicken or beef?

Nick: Fish, actually.

Natalie: It better be fresh.

Nick: I caught it myself last night.

Natalie: What did you use, your bare hands?

Nick: Fishing pole and with Schanke.

Natalie: He finally got you to go night fishing. Weird things men do together out in the cold night. So what did you end up telling Stonetree?

Nick: (*While preparing the fish.*) Well, according to Schanke's research, the Count's body was originally found inside an iron maiden in Spain. They thought it was a fake. It wasn't meant to be part of the exhibit, but someone left it out in the open as a joke. Of course, it will never be found now. We know what happened to the body.

Natalie: How about what you were doing in the museum with a dismembered body?

Nick: I told them I followed a man into the museum. The foundation which sponsored this exhibit had some nasty letters sent to them for desecrating his or her ancestor's good name. They were too eager to close the book on this one. They assumed the body in the coffin belonged to whomever sent those letters. He stole the body from the morgue and killed the guard in the process.

Natalie: What about the coffin full of blood?

Nick: They convinced themselves that he did it for some bloody ritual.

Natalie: You made that up.

Nick: For once I did not. The foundation needed this incident clear before the exhibit moved on to its next location. My turn to ask the question. What does your report say about the blood found in the coffin?

Natalie: The test shows that it was mostly expired human blood, but it's

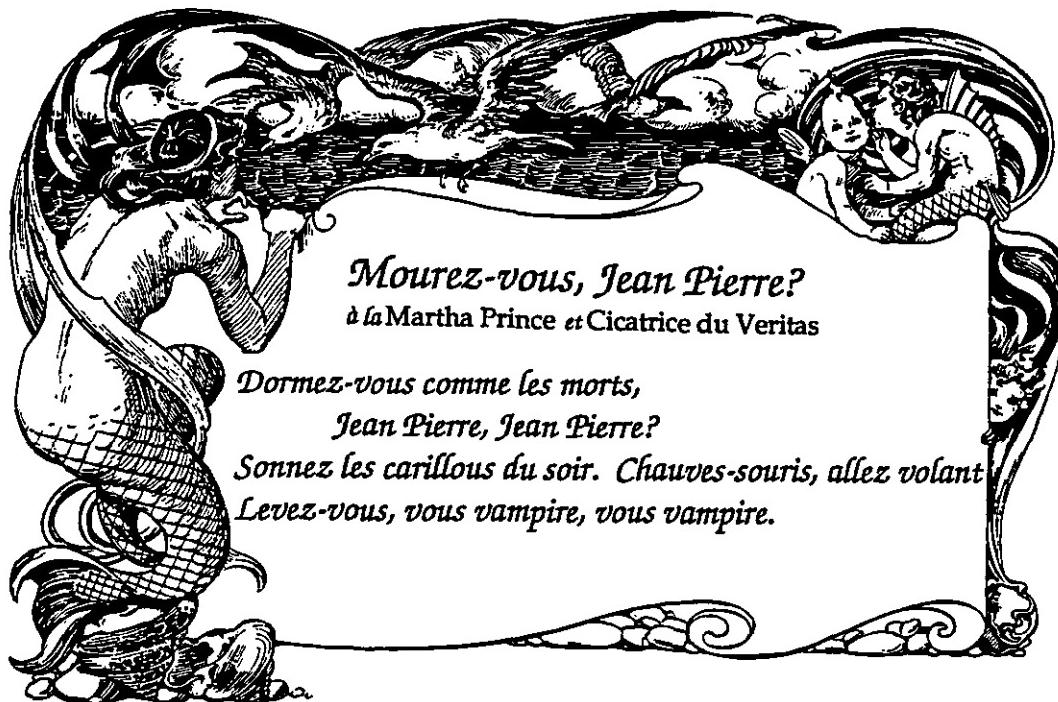
mixed with other animal bloods. No way of tracing the origins. It was a blood soup.

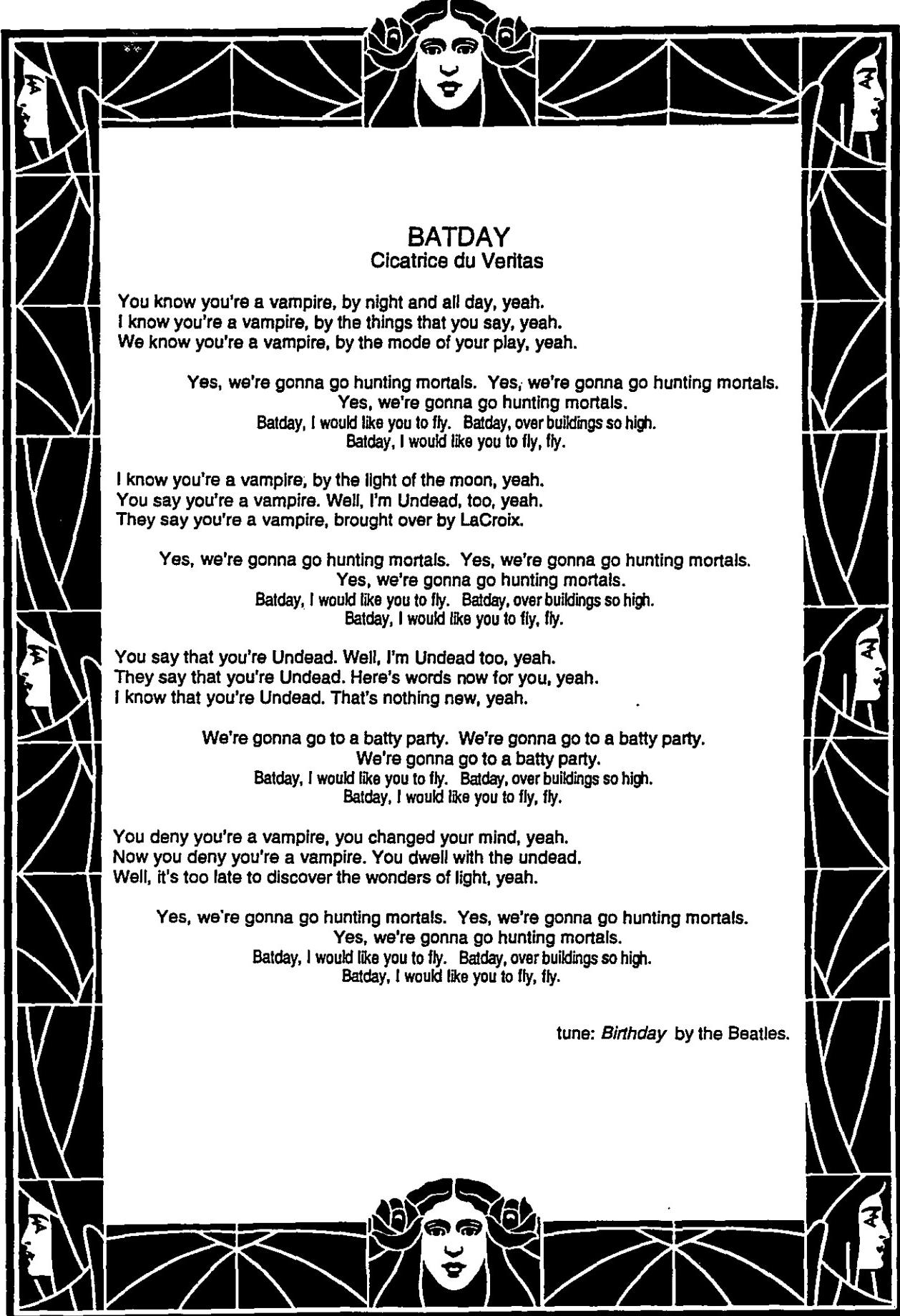
Nick: That cheating scum.

Natalie: What? Is there something I should know?

Nick: No.

Natalie: You better take that fish out before it's burned. (Points to the smoking frying pan.)





BATDAY Cicatrice du Veritas

You know you're a vampire, by night and all day, yeah.
I know you're a vampire, by the things that you say, yeah.
We know you're a vampire, by the mode of your play, yeah.

Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals. Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals.
Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals.
Batday, I would like you to fly. Batday, over buildings so high.
Batday, I would like you to fly, fly.

I know you're a vampire, by the light of the moon, yeah.
You say you're a vampire. Well, I'm Undead, too, yeah.
They say you're a vampire, brought over by LaCroix.

Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals. Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals.
Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals.
Batday, I would like you to fly. Batday, over buildings so high.
Batday, I would like you to fly, fly.

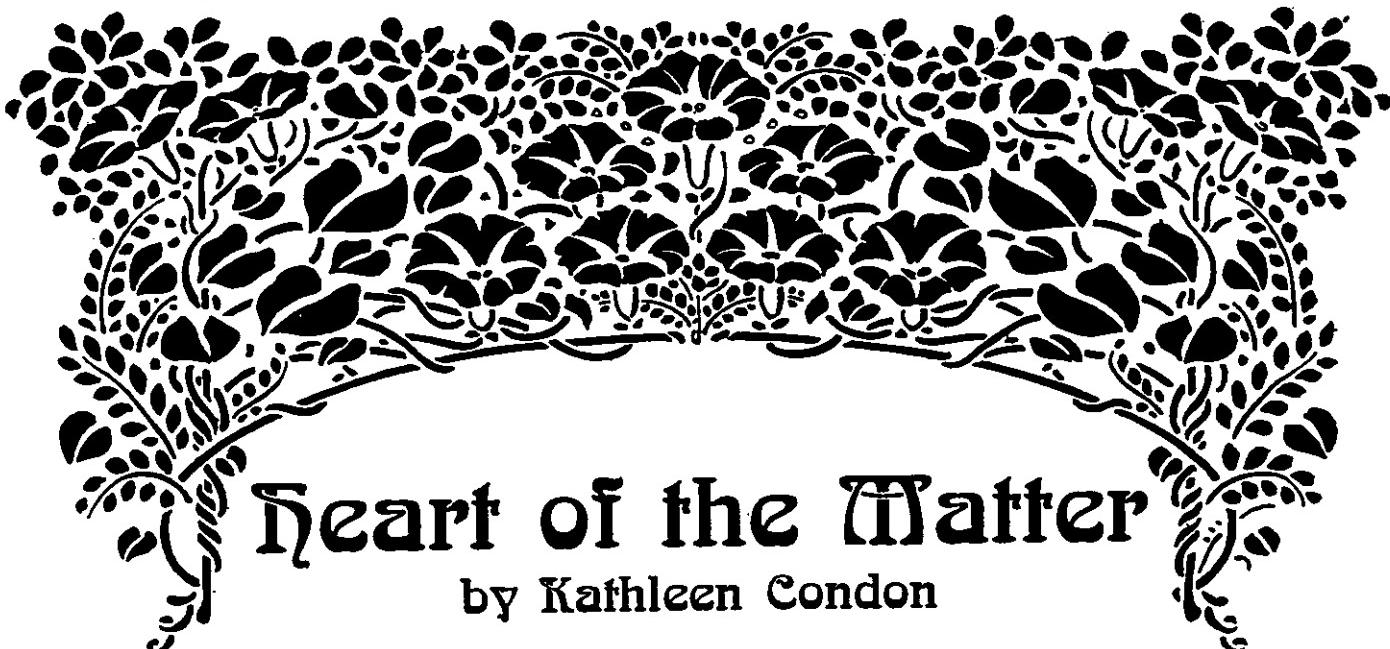
You say that you're Undead. Well, I'm Undead too, yeah.
They say that you're Undead. Here's words now for you, yeah.
I know that you're Undead. That's nothing new, yeah.

We're gonna go to a batty party. We're gonna go to a batty party.
We're gonna go to a batty party.
Batday, I would like you to fly. Batday, over buildings so high.
Batday, I would like you to fly, fly.

You deny you're a vampire, you changed your mind, yeah.
Now you deny you're a vampire. You dwell with the undead.
Well, it's too late to discover the wonders of light, yeah.

Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals. Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals.
Yes, we're gonna go hunting mortals.
Batday, I would like you to fly. Batday, over buildings so high.
Batday, I would like you to fly, fly.

tune: *Birthday* by the Beatles.



Heart of the Matter

by Kathleen Condon

Nick was dying and Natalie knew she had to move fast to save him. She set the transfusion up and was about to start the blood dripping when she heard, "Lambert -- don't do that!"

Natalie froze, slowly turning until she faced the speaker. It was Captain Stonetree, and he looked different somehow. There was a sinister air to the man that Natalie had never noticed before. Finding her voice, she asked, "Captain Stonetree, can I help you?"

Stonetree moved forward, his intentions not easy to read. "I said, Doctor Lambert -- don't do that! Let him die! Don't help Detective Knight!"

Natalie was confused. "But, Captain, I have to help Nick. I can't let him die. Why would you want him to die?"

Stonetree moved to the other side of the table Knight was lying on. "I've been sent to be sure Knight dies. He cannot be allowed to continue. We vampires have to protect ourselves."

He fixed Natalie with a penetrating stare, and she found herself unable to move. If he was to kill Nick, she could not stop him. "But, Captain," she continued with visible effort, "does that mean you're a..."

"Vampire?" he finished for her. "Yes, I am one of the Enforcers, one of the Undead. We deal with those of our kind who are threats to all vampires. Detective Knight is considered to be such a threat."

"Why is he a threat?" Natalie asked. "He hasn't revealed himself to anyone except me. Schanke doesn't even know. He even keeps the secret about The Raven. You can't kill Nick."

Stonetree shrugged. "So far you haven't given me any good reason for not killing Knight. If you can't do any better than that, you leave me with no choice but to kill him."

"And then you'll kill me?" Natalie asked quietly.

Stonetree seemed to find the idea amusing. "No, no, Doctor. There would be no reason to kill you. I would hypnotize you so you wouldn't remember I was here. All you would know is Detective Knight is dead."

Natalie knew she had to do something. She couldn't let Stonetree kill Nick. She then spoke slowly, "Captain Stonetree, or whatever your name is, you can't kill Nick. I know I can't stop you, but please think. Nick has kept his vampirism a secret. No one knows but me. He only uses his powers to help people, and he is very careful. He is only doing this for himself, to make amends. He is not doing this to hurt you or anyone else. I've been trying to

help him become mortal. He's my friend, and I don't want him to die."

Stonetree appeared to be considering her words. Finally, he spoke, "He's your friend, but I think it's more than that. I think you are in love with him though he doesn't know it and you won't admit it. Normally I wouldn't even consider sparing anyone I've been sent to remove. Let me think for a moment."

Natalie was shocked. Stonetree as a vampire was hard to accept but hearing him say she was in love with Nick, and knowing it was true, was even harder to accept. She supposed she did love Nick even though she knew nothing would ever come of it. Stonetree began to move towards Natalie.

Suddenly her ears were filled with the sound of her own heartbeat. The noise was overpowering and frightening all at once. The only thing Natalie was aware of was Stonetree's eyes and his voice. She had to fight him -- she couldn't let him win.

"Natalie, you will not remember I was here or anything we spoke of. You will not remember anything. You will not remember anything."

Natalie felt herself falling into a deep, black bottomless pit. Despite her intense efforts to resisting -- knowing if she went under, Nick would die -- Natalie slowly slipped away.

* * * * *

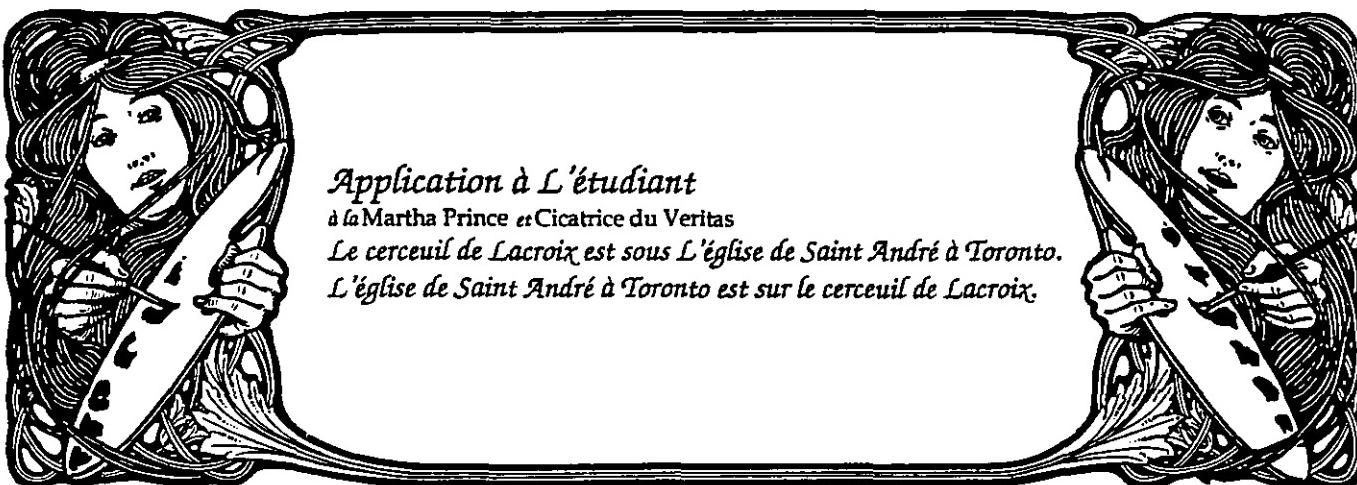
Waking up with a start, Natalie looked around the lab. At first she couldn't remember what was going on. She must have fallen asleep, proof to her that she had been working too hard. It was then she saw Nick stretched out on the exam table, an IV pool hanging a unit of plasma, feeding him blood. And from the looks of it, he was starting on his fourth bottle. Obviously she had done this -- no one else was around. No one else knew what Nick was or what he needed. Pushing herself to her feet, Natalie moved over to the table to check on the unconscious vampire.

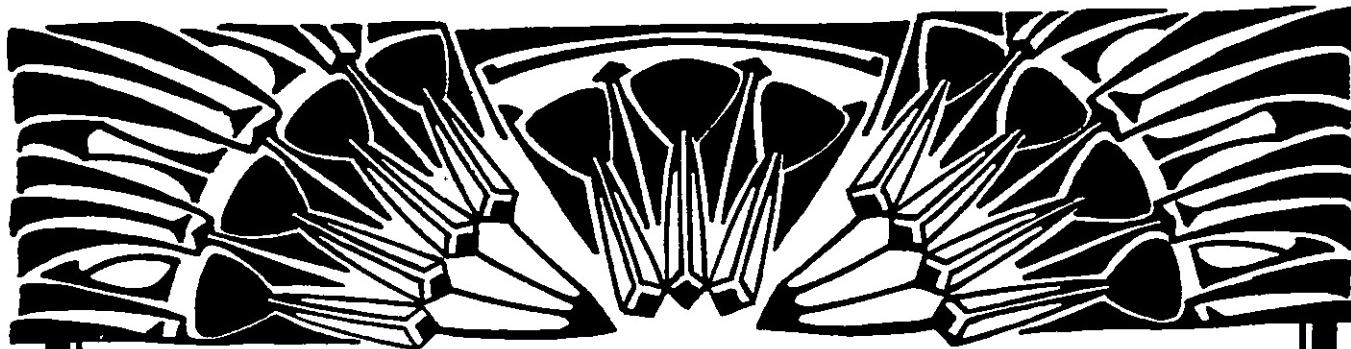
Knight was still out, having slipped into torpor. Nick had explained to her once -- when a vampire was badly injured, he would go into a deep healing sleep. The blood seemed to be helping. He even appeared to be trying to wake up.

Natalie looked at the transfusion, shaking her head. Maybe she was working too hard.

* * * * *

Out in the hallway, Captain Stonetree watched Natalie for a few minutes. Knight would live... for now.





MOON FIRE Cicatrice du Veritas

I should have known that vamp' La Croix would lie.
A time would come, and I would change and I would want to die.
Living death just isn't all he claimed that it would be,
Rainbows and the light of day would truly set me free.

But now it's almost dusk again.
Now, the dark is my good friend.
The rising moon is glowing like a jack'lantern's fire.

I've traveled far in seven centuries—
Wales and France and Canada, the States and Germany.
Running water, mirrors, other fables of my kind,
The myths which keep us safe from you, the lore that keeps you blind.

But now it's almost dusk again.
Now, the dark is my good friend.
The rising moon is glowing like a jack'lantern's fire.

If I could live and make that choice again,
Would I choose eternity to study life and men?
Would I choose immortality through children and a wife,
Instead of settling for this cold, dark counterfeit of life?

But now it's almost dusk again.
Now, the dark is my good friend.
The rising moon is glowing like a jack'lantern's fire.

tune: *Red Rubber Ball*, by Paul Simon



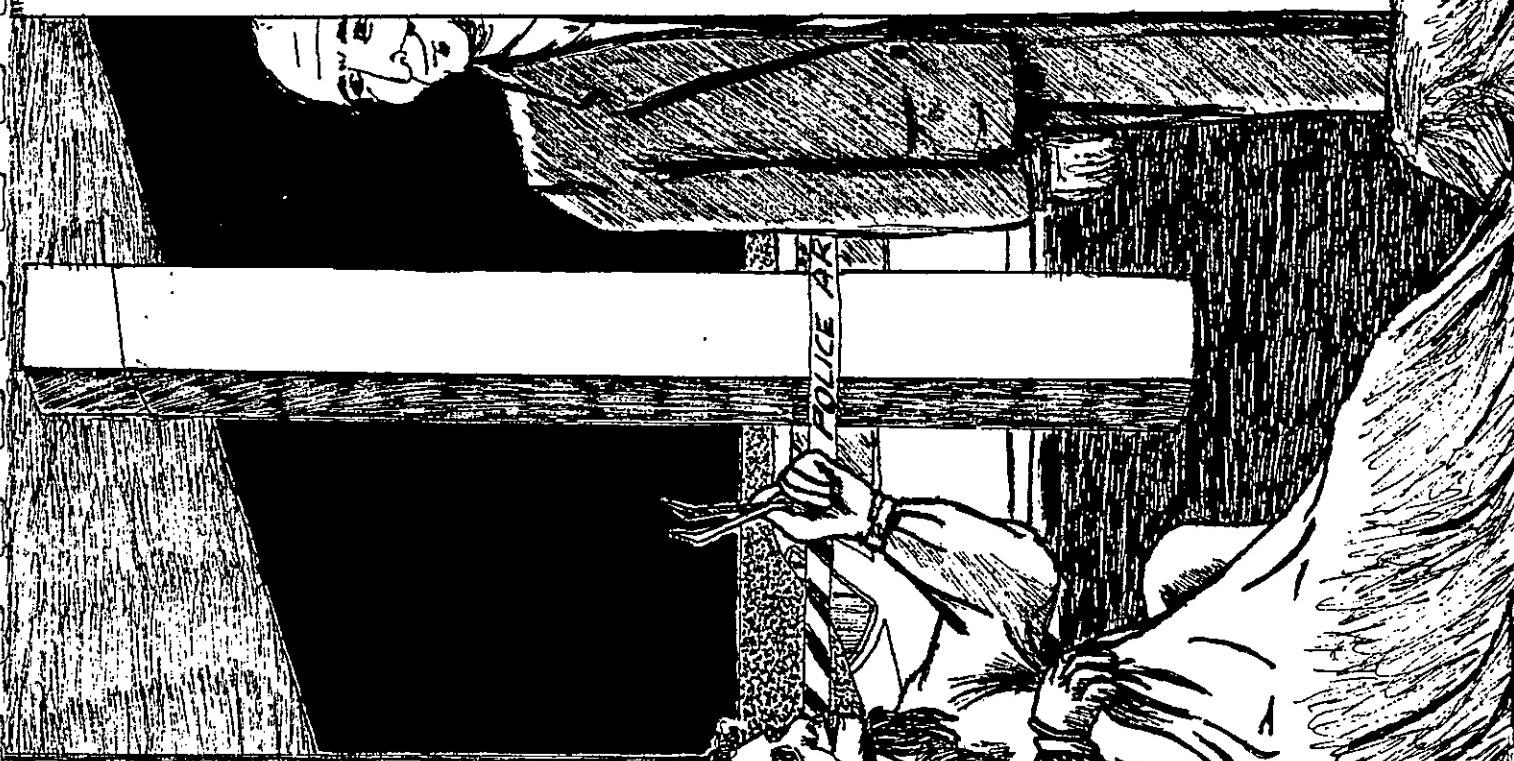
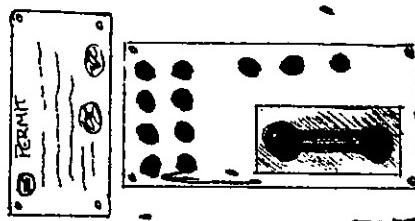


Toronto, 1993

'Where is that damn car!' a bedraggled woman cursed mentally as she slumped against a cold, cement wall, her shoulders drooping as numerous department store shopping bags dropped to the ground with a resounding thump. Ignoring the jarring sounds of potential breakables rattling in mediocre-packed boxes, she closed her eyes and sighed wearily, wishing she was back in her hotel room, perhaps soaking in the hot tub or in the health spa, oozing into the massage table as a masseuse pummeled her tired muscles into goo. That all sounded too good to her at the moment as she had been playing the "shop-till-you-drop" game since the Eaton Center opened for business that morning.

Not in her wildest dreams did she ever imagine a shopping mall the size of two or three office blocks with more stores than she had ever visit in a day... maybe two. It wasn't to say that Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolis had nothing to offer... just nothing as colossal or culturally stimulating as the Canadian society she had deliberately thrust herself into as part of her one-week vacation in Ontario which was soon winding down to a close. Despite the fact that her roommate had to cancel the long-planned pilgrimage at the last moment secondary to an unexpected death in the family back in Wisconsin, she had enjoyed her stay, albeit it was admittedly challenging to take in the sight without someone else to talk to. But the Eaton Center had wiped out that disappointment as Sheira had little love of window-shopping, rather her roommate would have spent the entire seven days in the "World's Biggest Bookstore", sleeping in the isles rather than the hotel room...

Glancing at her watch, she was alarmed at the time. "Six o'clock already!" she panicked aloud. "I'll be late for *Phantom!*" Grabbing her purchases, she



DEATH
Agents
KIEFF
PROOF

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scanned the rows of cars in the underground parking structure, frantically looking for any familiar landmark that would clue her into the location of her rented car. As she wandered down the slight incline, her eyes alighted on a row of stenciled number spray-painted onto the wall. *That's right! I have to go down two more levels!* she mentally chided herself.

Just as luck would have it, she spied a poorly lit sign that advertised the direction to one of the elevator shafts promising to lead her to her desired level. With quick strides hardly hampered by her merchandise, she trotted towards the alcove off in the distance. As she pressed the down button, the elevator dinged, the shiny steel doors sliding apart.

Before the tourist could react, a figure barreled out of the elevator, roughly shoving the woman aside. With a squawk, she teetered backwards, her bags flying from her hands, and she landed with a painful thud on her tailbone, sharp pains shooting up and down her spine. She whipped her head around, catching a quick but adequate glimpse of her assailant as the figure disappeared into the myriad of parked vehicles, but the retreating footsteps echoed and re-echoed in the subterranean parking structure.

"Shit!" she cursed as she struggled to her feet, wondering if her ceramic salsa crock with matching lid had survived the traumatic drop. Collecting her belongings, she managed to punch the down button again before the doors closed for good. But as the massive steel panels parted to allow admittance, the woman took one good look inside the elevator car, dropped her purchases again, and screamed, covering her eyes from the horrible spectacle.

The walls of the cubicle were wildly splattered with crimson, fresh blood that was still drizzling down to pool on the floor where a torso with a stake clean through the left side of the chest leaned in morbid recumbency. Dismembered extremities lay separate at compass points while the severed head formed the hub.

If she had been in the mood to further examine the elevator car, she would have spied the words, scribbled in blood: "Death to all bloodsuckers!"

* * * * *

Knight parked the caddy convertible a safe distance away from the hub-bub that choked off any decent maneuverability to the scene of the crime. Leaping out of the car without benefit of opening the door, he trotted to the roped-off area, leaving behind a grumbling Schanke who was muttering about Nick's obsessive notion that a little walk would do a lot of good for the ol' cardiovascular system rather than to admit that he didn't want his vintage vehicle scratched as in the previous night.

Nick flashed his badge to a uniformed officer who gestured him under the fluorescent orange plastic tape. And not without much intrepidity, the vampire approached the elevator car where Natalie was already hard at work.

"You're late," she grumped as she picked up a specimen of torn cloth with a forceps, holding it up to the light before stowing it in a plastic bag.

The detective averted his eyes at the grotesque scene before him. As used as he was to all the blood he often encountered as part of his job plus his ability to stave off the overwhelming temptation such a feast would present, this most recent rash of brutal, senseless murders had taxed his restraint to the maximum. Ducking his head out into the cool air, he breathed deeply, forcing the Beast within back into submission... just for the few minutes needed to investigate.

By now, Schanke had caught up, and by studying the expression on his partner's face, realized how badly the mess within must have been. "The same M.O.?"

Nick barely nodded. "Yes... decapitated head, dismembered arms and legs, stake through the heart... mouth stuffed with garlic cloves..." Too many times in the past he had beheld a similar ghastly scene, but after a respite of a century or two, the harsh reality of such an execution hit him hard.

If Schanke could have read Knight's mind at that time, he might have understood why his partner appeared so unnerved. Poking his head into the elevator car, he grimaced. "Natalie, I don't know how you can do it, especially around dinner time."

"Already ate. Spare ribs, in fact. Quite good..." she mumbled, her attention absorbed in her work.

"Such a nice girl... What sort of gene abnormality do you have to have to be able to tolerate that line of work?" Schanke smirked as he returned to Nick's side. "By the way, the uniforms say there was a witness."

The word "witness" percolated through Nick's mind, wrenching him back into the present from a hellish past. "Where?"

"Over there," his partner pointed, whipping out his little black book that he jotted case notes in. "Rumor has it she actually saw a face!"

The woman in question was seated in one of the patrol cars that had first responded to the call. Hands cupped around a cup of cappuccino, according to Nick's nose, yet even the inviting warmth of a very good cup of coffee failed to keep them trembling.

Officer Jamison, a six-month rookie, introduced a Ms. Laura Hefler, an American tourist, to the two detectives. Nick's discriminating eye noted that this woman was not the average, sloppily dressed, three-days'-overdue-for-a-bath sightseer he was more accustomed seeing in the downtown district of Toronto. Instead, she was impeccably groomed and wearing the latest style of casual attire that adorned the thirty-something year old woman. She glanced up, eyes weary but still horrified. "I was told that Toronto was a 'real-happening' kind of place by my friend. I never imagined this kind of excitement," she explained, her knuckles whitening as she clutched the cup.

"We understand you found the body in the elevator--"

"I don't want to be a pain in the butt, sirs, but I think I've told the story at least three times to three different people, and I'm completely worn out. I'm supposed to be driving home tomorrow."

"Just one more time, please?" Schanke coaxed, wearing his biggest, most charming smile. "This is where the buck stops."

"When did you discover the body?" Nick inquired.

"Just a few minutes after six. I was trying to find my car in this maze of a parking structure because I was supposed to be at the Pantages Theatre to see *Phantom* at seven-thirty. I found this elevator here because I had to go down a few more levels to get to my car. I had no sooner pressed the button when the doors opened and this person... could have been a woman... ran right into me and down that way--" She pointed towards her right. I was knocked over right on my butt -- I'm not sure if I broke or bruised my tailbone because it hurts like hell! I managed to get up and..." Her voice dropped several degrees in volume. "That's when I saw... that! Officers, I'm not a wimpy woman prone to vapors when someone mentions the word 'hemorrhoids', but I've never seen anything so... so... horrid in my life."

"Can you describe the person that ran into you?"

"Uh..." She pursed her lips together, brow furrowed in deep thought. "Let's see... maybe five-foot-six -- it was hard to tell because she was hunched over or bent over -- you know, like when you're running as fast as you can?"

"What convinced you this person was female?"

"Why, because of the heavy coat she was wearing," the woman answered matter-of-factly. "Not necessarily the latest fashion, maybe about two years

out of date, but very functional. One of those modified trenchcoats that was very popular a few seasons ago."

"You're a fashion designer?" Schanke asked, surprised.

"No, I'm a purchasing agent for several department stores in Minneapolis... No hat... She had brown hair that... maybe it was pulled back and tied or was cropped short..." The woman closed her eyes as if to reconstruct the facial features. "Kind of an average face, you know. But her eyes..." She paused, and now Nick's attention was completely held. "I must have imagined it, and you'll think I'm crazy... but they almost glowed, they were so intense."

Nick glanced at Schanke, then focused his attention on Jamison. "What's the artist's ETA to the station?"

"Any minute," replied the rookie. "We were to be called by dispatch the moment he arrives."

"Fine. Ms. Hefler, I know you have been inconvenienced much so far, but you are the first person to have seen a suspect that might be responsible for the recent murders and we are desperate for a composite--"

"Yes, yes, I'll go with you to the station," she agreed wearily. "I've already missed the first act of *Phantom* and by the time we're finished, I'll be too tired to care anymore." She rose and set the half-filled cup of coffee on top the roof of the squad car and reached for her belongings.

"Allow me," Schanke offered gallantly as he scooped up the various department stores shopping bags. "The Caddy, Nick?"

"Why not?" Anything to get me as far away from that elevator...

When the American caught sight of the turquoise green vintage beauty, she smiled appreciably. "Talk about being escorted in style. This isn't the norm for a Toronto police officer to be driving, is it? When I was in California, their highway patrol cruised around in Trans Am's and Porsches and--"

"She runs at the mouth, doesn't she?" Schanke whispered covertly to Nick."

"That's adrenalin talking," he replied soberly as he put the caddy into reverse.

* * * * *

The clock that stared across from the other side of Nick's desk displayed to all that it was already half past midnight when the artist's composite finally came hot off the photocopier. Peering over the vampire's shoulder, Schanke studied the face before him with much concentration. "I don't know, Nick... Something about that face... It's almost like I should know her..."

"Huh?" Knight turned around to face his partner. "Think, Schanke. Gut feeling right now -- where have you seen her?"

"TV -- that's it! It was television!" He then scowled. "You know how much television I've watched in the past ten years? It'll be impossible for me figure that out."

Nick quelled the urge to mentally tap his partner's mind, so he opted to watch Schanke rewind his mental videotape but even after ten minutes of silence, the man grunted his defeat. "Sorry, Nick. Maybe something might trigger it to mind later on. At least we have something to go on other than a faceless person who thinks he's -- I mean, she's -- ridding our wonderful city of vampires. Not like we've got plenty to spare." He was then confronted with a disturbed look from Nick. "Well, you have to admit that we've had our share of kooks who believe themselves to be vampires. Perhaps this is Nature's means of checks and balances."

Inwardly relieved, Nick only grinned. "I wonder if Natalie has found anything new for us."

* * * * *

"Same means of death," the beautiful coroner beneath the blood-stained white dissection coat commented as she weighed a hefty liver in the scales the dangled just above the dissection table. "Decapitation, followed by the ol' stake-through-the-heart routine and ceremonial dismemberment. Whoever this creep is, he certainly wants to make sure this poor soul is truly dead."

"We have reason to believe it's a woman," Nick informed the doctor.

Eyebrows rose in amazement. "She would have to be one hell of a strong broad to wield a sword or machete that could have done this butchery. It still looks as if only one, swift stroke did the work. I don't see any signs of repeated hacking."

"The last time I've seen anything this gross was in a *Friday the Thirteenth* movie," Schanke responded, his eyes glued to the head perched at the foot of the autopsy table. "Garlic again?"

"Yup," Natalie confirmed. "Exactly twenty-one cloves of genuine garlic. Your Dr. Van Helsing is being very thorough -- and very quick. I estimated that this body was cold no longer than fifteen minutes when he was found. And from the expression still on his face, he was just as surprised as your witness was."

By now, a green tinge was slowly creeping over the man's face as he abruptly turned away and headed swiftly to the door. "Ah... I think I need some air now, Nick. I'll see you later." The doors swung shut behind the fleeing man.

"Thought he'd never go," Natalie muttered as she returned her attention back to Nick's face. "I don't know how you are managing not to panic when what we have is a person convinced there's vampires to kill right here in Toronto."

"Apparently, she's an incredibly bad judge of vampires," he criticized cynically. "If she had indeed killed one of us, the police wouldn't be stuffing body bags."

"Any news from Janette?"

Nick shook his head. "There's been no regulars missing from her circle of friends and acquaintances. You would think I'd be relieved..."

Plopping the liver into a plastic bucket filled with glyceraldehyde, the coroner activated the dictaphone with her foot and murmured some comments regarding the organ's color, weight, and texture, making a verbal note to refer to the histological report that would soon be following. Snapping the plastic lid on the bucket, she then delved into the chest cavity and neatly dissected out the heart.

By now, Knight's nose wrinkled as he could no longer block out the acrid smell of the preservatives. "I think our suspect is nothing but a copycat."

"Why?"

"All the other murders were committed while the victims were sleeping... during the day. This is the first time she's attacked a fully awakened person."

"It was around dusk," Natalie reminded him.

"But why the change of plan? The Vencetti murder took place while he was napping at his home. The Unlucky Honeymooners were sleeping off a very bad hangover when Ms. Van Helsing struck. Both White and Reitze were killed in their beds... Unless you're absolutely convinced that the details of tonight's murder is the same as the previous four, I would think this chap was the hapless victim of a copycat."

The coroner shook her head. "I doubt it. Your publicist purposely leaves out several crucial details to help you differentiate between copycat and the real McCoy -- such as the number of garlic cloves stuffed in the mouth. "This--" She jabbed her finger at the dismembered corpse, "--was done by the same individual."

"Then?"

"I think she's slipping up, or she's trying to make it look like a copycat murder, only she's just duplicating her own job far too well." She then placed the heart on the scale and stepped back, glancing up at Nick so he was in full view of her worried eyes. "Are you going to be all right?"

"Yeah... why do you ask?"

"Because you have that faraway look on your face again. Remembering something from your past that you're too sensitive to talk about -- even with me?"

Those words stun Nick more than he thought they would as he realized how his tendencies to isolate himself whenever he was reminded of past experiences and moreso how his withdrawal must affect Natalie. He drew a deep breath. "Ever since these Van Helsing cases first began, it's like I've been hit by a tidal wave of *deja vu*. It's... it's not the actual murders perpetrated against the mortals, as it is in this case, but the decapitation that bothers me."

Natalie's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline, not quite expecting this confession. "What about the decapitation?"

"As you already know, decapitation is just as effective in killing a vampire as a stake through the heart -- and incredibly permanent." He absently ran his fingers through his short, cropped hair. "On retrospect, I'm rather surprised that the media didn't focus more on that method as they have the ol' stake..."

As he paused, Natalie only patiently waited for him to continue.

"It was back in the Eighteen-Hundreds when LaCroix and Janette convinced me to accompany them to the Orient. Of course, I was very reluctant to go, knowing that LaCroix was becoming quite bored with Europe and wanted something completely different."

"So he suggested Chinese take-out?"

Nick groaned at the pun of incredibly bad taste on more than one level. "Yes... What happened in China is a story for another time. However, in Japan..."

Japan, 1885

The Lotus House of Unearthly Delights had to be the last place Nicholas would have envisioned himself patronizing, but he was there, nonetheless, seated cross-legged on a tatami, a reed-woven mat, listening to the strangely poignant song being plucked from the cat-gut strings of the *samisen*. The second-rank courtesan, a young Japanese woman he had been introduced to at the teahouse down the street, worked her fingers with the strings, shaping the haunting melody that pricked the vampire's memory with terrible clarity, reminding him of regrets he had thought he had pushed out of his mind...

The song came to its inevitable end, and the woman gracefully set back, her almond-shaped eyes gazing directly into his with an unspoken request to know his next desire. And as the two stared at each other, Nicholas wondered why he even allowed himself to get into this situation in the first place. All he had wanted to do was to shake off LaCroix and Janette for a few hours in order to explore this new strange land he found himself in... and hope against hope that he might find the answer to his increasingly growing dissatisfaction of his current existence. In all the countries he had traveled, he always sought a means to undo the damage he had done way back in Paris when the entrancing daughter of a French nobleman had enticed him to taste the dark side of life that had changed his entire life... unlife? The first couple centuries had been exhilarating... but now he foresaw the *ennui* that would overtake him and make him jaded... just as it had happened to LaCroix. Realizing he did not have the

complete disregard for anything that was lawfully good, he knew he had to do something before he allowed what was left of his soul to be sucked into such a dark oblivion that would rob him of whatever humanity that might still be lurking in his soul...

Which was why he had allowed himself to wander Edo's dark streets that eventually led him to the Islands of Flowers, the notorious district of "one-night wives", prostitutes, and first-rank tayu, the most expensive and haughty of all the courtesans. After passing through entry gate that was guarded by a many-wrinkled ogre of a man whose age did not discount the fact that his body belied his many years living on this earth. There, Nicholas had been relieved of whatever item that was or could be used as a weapon and had been given a strip of colored paper folded in an intricate design which he assumed would be a marker to identify the articles taken from his person when he returned to the stark world of reality after a night of supposed bliss.

Bliss wasn't the object of his pursuit. Nor was his goal a stomach of warm blood from the perfumed neck of an unsuspecting geisha.

Quite by accident, he found himself herded into a nearby teahouse. But instead of discovering an establishment to relieve physical thirst, he realized this was where men wishing to spend a warm night with a warm and entertaining companion came to review the lists and descriptions (with price estimates) of the various women that were to be found in the Islands of Flowers. He squinted at the vertical rows of unfamiliar caricatures, wishing he had brought someone who could translate for this poor gaijin, a somewhat derisive term for foreigner.

Apparently, he must had been staring at the lists for enough time to call attention to his illiteracy, for he heard a discrete clearing of the throat behind him. Whirling around in surprise, he found himself face to wrinkled face with an ancient, spindly woman wrapped in wine-red, multilayered kimonos who bowed respectfully before him. "Do you require assistance in your selection?" she enunciated carefully in French.

Impressed by her command of the language, he nodded. "I would like..." He paused awkwardly.

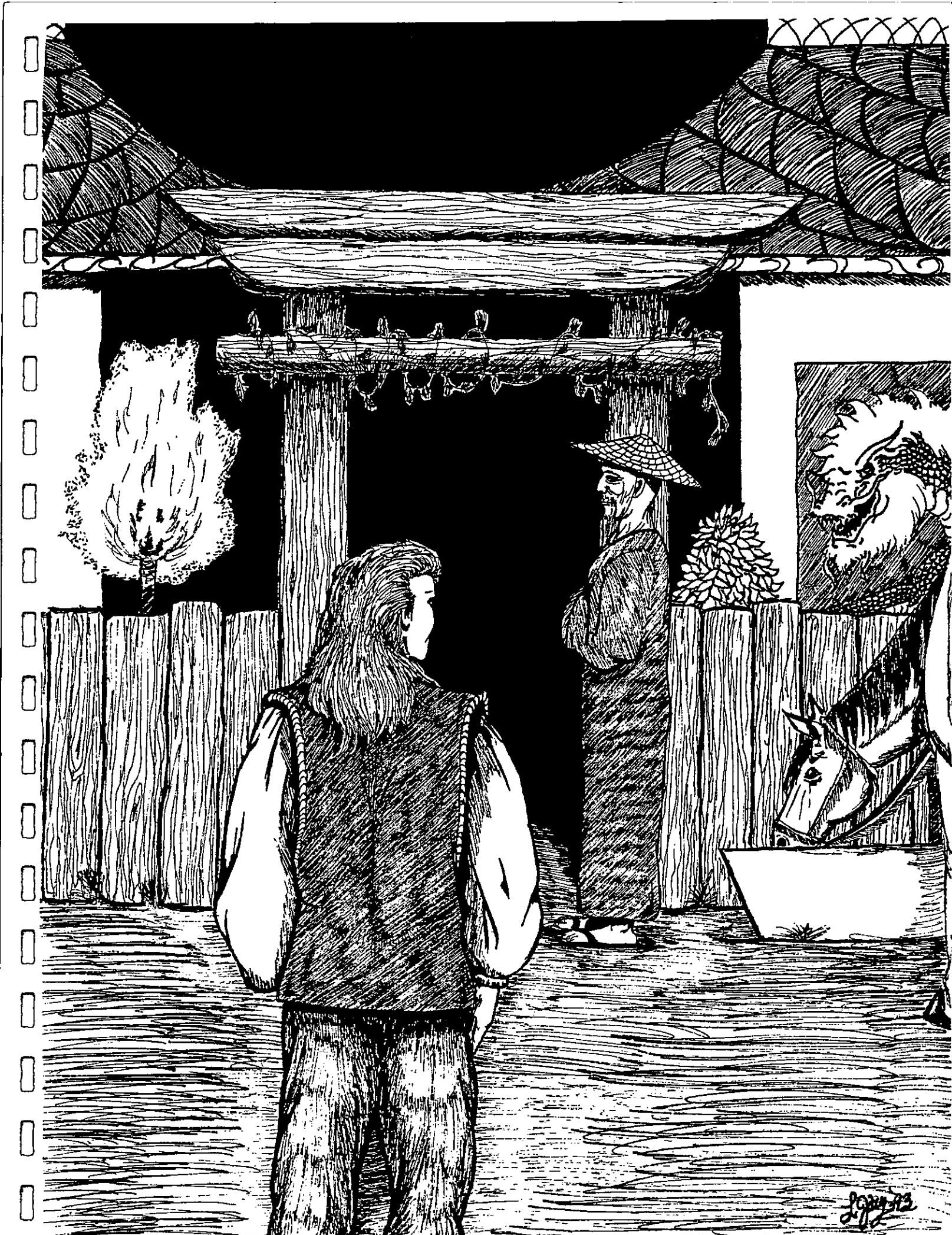
What would he like?

She waited patiently, as if she was always posing such a question to such indecisive men. As he grappled with the best way to broach the subject, he finally finished, "I would like to meet someone who knows stories and legends... like evil spirits and ghosts and..."

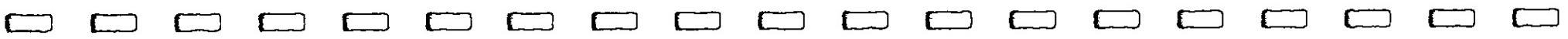
She cracked a barely perceptible smile. "An odd request, Honorable Sir, however I believe I can direct you to the object of your desire." Her eyes scanned the many lists posted on the walls, intermixed with stunning examples of pastoral scenes of the life of the Japanese nobility. Having no luck at this spot, she hobbled along the wall, passed tables and benches where skillfully dressed and carefully painted prostitutes cavorted with perspective bedpartners that were mostly wealthy merchants, relaxing government bureaucrats, or jaded members of the noble class who were drinking warmed sake and ale.

As Nicholas followed the old woman, he was acutely aware of the stares and jeers he attracted from the less sober patrons of the teahouse. And an odd sight he must had been -- a gaijin relying on the aid of a frail, elderly woman to help him find a woman to act as his one-evening wife. But after surviving the taunts of humiliation by LaCroix for these many centuries, the rude shouts flung at him paled in comparison.

He nearly walked over the old woman who had come to a quick stop, hunched over as squinting eyes perused one particular advertisement. Then, pointing to red-inked letters, she turned to him and gave him a toothy smile. "Umeko. She is whom you desire--" Nicholas wasn't certain if that was a question or a



2
The Woman Who Walked Away



statement of fact. "I will make arrangements."

He presented her with several token copper mon for her services, and she scuttled away through the carousing crowds, leaving Nicholas standing alone to fend for himself. By now, the novelty of a lone gaijin had worn off, and the vampire chose that opportunity to find a dark corner to abscond to, to watch the world go by in the shelter of shadows, wondering why he had been so impulsive to wander out alone in a society so much different from his own.

Ten minutes had passed before the old grandmother returned with an exquisite creature of a woman, dressed in flowing silk robes that billowed out behind her like clouds following in her wake. "This is Umeko, or Plum Blossom, second rank," the old woman translated, gesturing towards the young woman who appeared to be no older than nineteen years old, her thick black hair carefully coifed, lacquered, and interwoven with silk flowers. The courtesan kowtowed deeply and gestured with a slight motion of her hand for Nicholas to follow.

The three left the teahouse in time to avoid a brawl that had just erupted between two sailors arguing over the same woman, and after several minutes of uneventful walking, Nicholas was led into the richly lit Lotus House of Unearthly Delights where he was escorted through a maze of paper-walled corridors until the old grandmother slid aside a door panel and gestured for Nicholas to remove his boots before walking through. Here, the vampire found a comfortable room, its floor covered with newly woven tatami, a small brazier in the corner where glowing coals glimmered, ready to warm any number of bottles of sake.

While the old woman's French was somewhat stilted, Umeko's use of the language was flawless, as was her samisen playing. In fact, Nicholas was quite unnerved at the idea of being served and entertained by a woman whose only desire was his desire and not because of ulterior motives or schemings which was something he was all too familiar with.

And the stories... Heroic fairy tales but instead of knights in shining armor and hapless, tower-imprisoned princesses in distress, she spoke of samurai warriors and maidens who sacrificed much to defend their honor. And the ghost stories! Evil hobgoblins waylaying pilgrims on their way to the holy shrines. The Buddhist priest who unknowingly spun stories for a nobleman long-since dead. The unlucky man who married three sisters by day, but transformed into giant serpents by night. Nicholas was enrapt by this Oriental Scheherazade that he almost forgot that dawn was quickly approaching.

"You are most... original," the geisha eventually stated as she slowly sipped sake to soothe her dry throat. "Others would have been impatient and preferred just pillow talk. Are you not interested in pillow talk? Am I unsuitable?"

Her frankness on the matter of sex almost encouraged him to laugh in astonishment. "No, you are most suitable. I am... I have always been interested in myths and legends, yet I believe there is always an element of truth in each tale."

"Then you believe in ghosts?" she asked simply without a hint of approval or disapproval.

"I believe in curses."

Her eyes softened. "You have a soul that is much distressed, do you?"

He nodded, amazed by her perceptiveness.

"I understand."

"Do you?" Nicholas asked, not certain if she was truly sincere.

She set aside the samisen and folded her hands demurely onto her lap with the precision of years of intense training for the perfect routine, the correct angulation. "You are much different than the other gaijin. Are you accursed?"

"I am looking for someone... something that can lift the curse I must

endure each day. Can you help?"

"Perhaps," she murmured slowly. "I know a Buddhist priest whom many say is a powerful man in the ways of the spirits. Perhaps he can help you."

"Who is he?"

"I may be able to arrange to deliver you to him, but it is a long journey by foot."

Not on vampire wings, Nicholas thought wryly. "How do I reach him?"

"I must take you to him," she insisted, "for he knows me. He is my great uncle."

"When?"

"Tomorrow... maybe the next day..."

Nicholas shook his head. "I can only travel by night."

This restriction took Umeko off-guard as she scrutinized him closely. "Very pale skin," she spoke softly. "Very well, meet me outside the teahouse where Great Aunt Matsuko brought me to you at the hour of the Dog."

He racked his brain for an adequate translation of time as the Japanese referred each two-hour block of time to a particular animal which had caused no end to his confusion. "As long as the sun is down," he finally commented.

She nodded slowly. "We shall walk for two days -- or nights, as you have desired. Please bring provisions."

* * * * *

Nicholas had barely slipped to the virtual mansion LaCroix had managed to obtain, and he silently absconded down the darkened hallways just as the sun emerged above the horizon. And as expected, LaCroix was waiting for him like a vigilant parent. "Enjoy yourself tonight?" he queried with a slight hint of a sneer.

Nicholas was about to brace himself for another tirade of humiliation and taunting when a wave of exhaustion suddenly overwhelmed him, reminding him that he hadn't partaken enough blood to satisfy his everyday needs. "Edo is a fascinating city," he murmured half-heartedly as he attempted to walk past him.

LaCroix firmly grasped him by the upper arm, halting his retreat. "You seem rather preoccupied. Have you discovered a new theory for your research?"

Nicholas knew exactly what LaCroix was referring to -- his never-ending search to reconvert back to being mortal. He said nothing, knowing his mentor and nemesis could see through any deception he might attempt.

"Ah, Nicholas, when will you ever quit?" LaCroix's lips were mere inches away from his ear, and Nicholas could smell the heady perfume of fresh, virginal blood which made his stomach squirm and crawl with forbidden cravings. "Why can't you be happy with the gift given you? Would you have ever dreamed in your wildest dreams back in Paris that you would be here in the glorious Far East six centuries beyond your ordinary mortal lifespan, enjoying the pleasures of wealth, sensuality, and unending pleasures if it weren't for me? Or, if you are so convinced that a mortal's life is what you want, then why not walk out right now into the Golden Sunrise and taste your own mortality? Hmm?"

Despite his attempt to hide his reaction, Nicholas could not control the shudder that rippled through him. The thought of the sun was not that struck fear deep in his soul... His thoughts reflected back the teachings of the humble priest on his father's lands who taught him about the glories of the hereafter for God's Faithful. The fear of the unknown beyond True Death still haunted his dreams while he slept the sleep of the Dead during the Sun's temporal reign, and still he would wake up, a scream caught in his throat as he barely escaped the horrors of the opening doors of hell that was greeting him just as he awoken.

And LaCroix knew about these dreams, damn him!

"It's dawn," he managed to say, shrugging off his mentor's hold, and then turned his back on LaCroix and wandered to his room, a subterranean cubicle of wood without windows, much different than the usual paper walls. Here, he stretched out on the three futon-thick mattress on the chilled floor, closed his eyes and fell asleep.

* * * * *

As promised, Umeko was waiting for him just outside the teahouse, however, instead of being accompanied by Great Aunt Matsuko, another figure flanked the geisha. Surprised, Nicholas carefully studied the smooth-chinned young man that stood a hand-span taller than the courtesan, his head covered by a flat, conical cane hat held in place by a tight strap under his chin which obscured most of his face. He wore somber grey and brown robes, feet socked with the traditional tabi and shod with wooden sandals. A rather ordinary escort except for the sheathed long sword at his side and a smaller version, its blade approximately a foot long, tucked in his haramaki, a wide strip of heavily woven cloth that was wrapped tightly around his waist and lower chest. On his back was a pack, mostly likely provisions for their journey.

"This is Akako," Umeko introduced her silent companion to Nicholas. "The Tokaido Road, in places, can be very dangerous. We will need protection."

Nicholas patted his hip where he wore his pistols, more for appearance rather than the obvious practical reasons. Still, appearances were important, and an unarmed gaijin would draw more attention than an armed one. "I am ready. Shall we go?"

Umeko, dressed now in peasant clothes, bowed with the same grace as if she was still dressed in the thin silk kimonos she had worn the previous night. "I have arranged for letters of travel issued to us. At all times you must be accompanied by Akako, or you may be arrested as a... a spy," she faltered slightly, struggling for the correct word she was searching for.

Nicholas agreed silently as the trio turn their backs on the teahouse that was just beginning what would promise to be a pleasurable -- and profitable -- night of carousing and pillow talk, and he hoped as he approached the gate leading out of the Islands of Flowers that the curse could be removed so that he could, in the strength and power of the daylight, avenge himself on LaCroix once and for all...

Toronto, 1993

Natalie listened, enrapt by Nick's narrative, that she forgot she still had to dissect the victim's coronary arteries and take samples. "Did LaCroix find out that you had vamoosed?" she pressed.

But before Nick could continue the recitation, the morgue's dual doors swung apart as Schanke rushed through them, his face flushed. "Nick, there's been another murder, this time by the the waterfront near the Expo! Just got the report over the radio!"

The coroner plopped the heart in a nearby bucket and rapidly stripped off the latex gloves with quick snaps, carelessly tossing them into the red plastic-lined garbage can. "I'm coming with you!" she announced as she dashed past Nick before either detective could argue.

* * * * *

"Shit!" Schanke muttered under his breath as he surveyed the carnage.

"Twice in one night! Can't this broad call it quits?"

Nick silently agreed with his partner as he crouched down and poked at the corners of yet another hapless victim's mouth with a metal probe. As expected, he caught a glimpse of a neatly peeled garlic clove behind closed incisors, and he wrinkled his nose as the pervasive acrid odor assaulted his nose, bringing up a sensation of bile from his throat. Stepping back, he glanced over his shoulder, observing several uniforms struggling with an over-rambunctious reporter and a film crew trying to traverse the official roped-off area to get a better glimpse of the dismembered corpse for the morning scoop on the morning television coverage.

"Nick?" Natalie's voice distracted his mental calculations. "I'll bet my eye teeth that this was done by your man, uh, woman. Unfortunately, she's been dead for at least two hours."

"Which means she could be anywhere now. Schanke! Ignore the reporters! You know what Stonetree said about further publicity on this case!"

"I was just reading them the riot act, Nick!" his partner groused as he sauntered back to the scene of the crime which he was trying to avoid. "The body was found by a couple who professed to be engaged to be married, but it turns out that the gentleman's fiance is in real life Handcuffs Heather Stanton, Lady of the Night Extraordinaire. They were attempting to find a romantic dark corner to do the wild thing when they came across... what was left of her." He handed Nick a responding officer's report.

Knight shook his head as he reviewed the duo's testimonies which revealed no information that could shed any further light on their suspect, but he couldn't help but to wonder if Heather would be slapped with a solicitations charge.

By now, the coroner's van had already arrived, and Natalie's assistants were now hauling out a gurney loaded with sampling equipment, too many plastic specimen containers, and, of course, the infamous black vinyl zippered body bag for the remains. Already, Natalie was thoroughly engrossed in her work, ignoring the angry shouts of outrage by the reporter as he was again escorted away from the scene of the crime. Weary of charges of "The Public has a right to know!", Nick threw the red-faced journalist a baleful, but threatening look with the promise to wreck terrible vengeance if the man continued to interfere with police work.

Schanke just scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I don't know, Nick. We'll probably find some fingerprints that might match any of the hundreds we found in the elevator at Eatons. Until the fingerprint experts finish their job, there isn't much left here for us except to canvass the area and see if anyone might have seen something suspicious."

"I'll make you a deal then," Nick offered. "I'll do the footwork this time. Why don't you become a couch potato and find out why the sketch of our suspect looks familiar to you?"

His partner's face brightened up for the first time that evening, but then he glowered. "Wait a minute. You have a lead on the killer, don't you? Or are you going to hang out at *The Raven*?" he accused suspiciously.

"Nothing of the sort," Knight grinned. "Call it payback for all the times you did the boring scut work."

"I don't know..."

* * * * *

After three and a half hours of combing the waterfront, interviewing a half dozen bums and a few paid snitches that usually haunted the northern shore of Lake Ontario, keeping their eyes open for information that might buy them a few

bottles of hootch, Nick gave up and wandered to *The Raven* which was beginning to close for the night. Already, most of its patrons had departed, leaving behind a few stragglers coaxing just one more drink from the bartender who was finishing tidying up for the night. As Nick parked himself at the end of the bar, Janette stepped out from behind a curtain of woven cast iron scrapnel that hid several of the backrooms used by "privileged" members, sometimes accompanied by naive first-timers to the macabre nightclub.

"Jacques," she called to the bartender, "please pour Nicholas a glass from my special selection... the 1953."

"Janette," Nick growled with a feral menace, "I'm on duty, and you know my preference--"

She held up a hand to effectively cut him off. "Nicholas," she breathed with her usual French seductiveness, "it is a few hours before the dawn, and I keep on hand something... more suitable to your tastes." She then passed to him a many-faceted crystal goblet filled to the brim of deep crimson liquid that rippled sensuously in the nightclub's elaborate lighting. Scented, enticing tendrils ascended before his nose, and he was suddenly consumed by the almost blinding red haze that threatened to cloud his vision. Raising the glass to his lips, he downed its contents with little ceremony, and his stomach rumbled with satiation. Setting the goblet on the bar countertop, he murmured his appreciation.

"You had that look like you missed lunch," she returned but with a slight sneer of disgust. "How can you possible settle for second-best -- and a very poor second-best at that?"

"You and I had the last couple centuries to discuss that issue," he reminded her as his finger traced down her pale, silken cheek to the angular edge of her jaw.

"And it is useless to argue when your mind is set," she responded, closing her eyes, sharing the intimacy of the moment, one that went beyond transitory lust and passion, but that of two souls having shared and survived so much over so many lifetimes. She then sighed, closing her mind off from distant memories she did not want to deal with at the moment. "Nicholas, rumor has it that the Enforcers have become very interested with these new murders."

Knight broke off the physical contact and quickly sobered. "I was afraid of that."

"They are hardly pleased at all the attention these murders are attracting from the general public. If something isn't done now, they may believe it necessary to disperse us 'for our own good'." Her eyes flashed with fiery possessiveness. "I am not about to close the doors on *The Raven* because of paranoid Enforcers are afraid these crimes will reveal our existences here. I'm weary of always quickly packing my essentials if I am that fortunate, and running away from infantile fears of discovery."

Quite unexpectedly, Nick swelled with pride at her fierce steadfastness. After so many centuries of being on the run, he could only agree with her. Finally, he had managed to find a home with real friends to be there for him... something he could not afford to take for granted. "We've had our first good break tonight -- an eyewitness. The only part of her testimony that bothers me is that the perpetrator was described to have eyes so intense that they glowed."

"Not another vampire..."

"You wouldn't have thought so on the basis of the first five murders which were done in broad daylight, in rooms with windows without drawn curtains. But our eyewitness this evening described the murderer as a woman with glowing eyes -- but she couldn't describe the color." He then extracted a copy of the artist's composite from his coat pocket and handed it to Janette. "Please keep an eye out for this woman. If she happens to come here, do anything and

everything you can to detain her and call me immediately."

The French vampire eyed the sketch thoughtfully. "I can say that she hasn't been here yet... but eventually everyone with a dark secret will come to *The Raven*..."

* * * * *

As Nick closed the vault-like door of his apartment and secured it shut, he flopped himself in a chair, remote in hand, and activated his answering machine.

"Nick, it's me, Schanke," the machine parroted back. "I'm going to be holing myself up in the CBC archives for the next couple of days. Figured that I should review all the news in reference to fencing, martial arts, and anything similarly related, including all Olympic events covered. Never thought I'd be paid to watch sports, but a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. Don't despair. I'll hold out, but just pray that my popcorn supply does the same. See ya!"

The answering machine beeped once, and then Natalie's voice issued from the speaker. "Nick, just want to let you know that the waterfront victim has been identified as Jessica Langsly from from Gelfh, according to the ID on her person. Wallet was left behind with over one hundred dollars and various credit cards still intact. I'll be doing the autopsy on her tomorrow night... I mean, tonight. God, I'm so tired, I can't keep my calendar straight. Get some sleep, Nick, because I certainly will..."

As the machine shut down, Nick, stretched back, too fatigued to do a few chores around the house that needed to be done but too exhausted to sleep, his brain still whirling with unbidden memories dredged up by the night's two slaughters...

Japan, 1885

Akako, Umeko's silent bodyguard, expertly maneuvered them down the moonlit Tokaido Road, the magnificent highway that connected Edo to Kyoto, the central capital of Japan. As expected, legitimate travelers had already sought shelter, leaving the road victim to assorted thieves, brigands, the masterless ronin... and vampires, Nicholas presumed. As the trio plodded down the seemingly empty, shadowy highway, Akako assumed first position, followed by Umeko, and lastly, Nicholas who only marveled at the beauty of the night, the silent sentinels of the surrounding trees, the deep, musky scent of nocturnal-blooming flowers, the steady ruckus of a myriad of crickets and tree frogs hidden all around them. Occasionally, the insects and amphibians were hushed by a nightingale's song of intricate complexity and transcendental clarity that thrilled his ears as he had never heard such an exquisite bird of the night.

Umeko softly giggled behind a delicate hand at his amateur marvelings. "Do you not have such a creature in your country?" she discretely inquired.

"Nothing compares," he admitted in awe. "Tell me about it."

And that was how the first night of traveling passed. Umeko began a lengthy treatise on the natural sciences of Japan, including its flora and fauna, and Nicholas had to revise his original opinion of second-rank courtesans for not only was she well versed with the samisen and storytelling as he had discovered back at the Lotus Palace of Unearthly Delights, but she was a very intelligent scholar who was able to answer his myriad of questions without hesitation. Like a man who thirsted in the desert, Nicholas drank deeply of the wisdom and information she imparted as he knew knowledge was indeed strength.

Before dawn, Akako halted before a small roadside shrine that consisted solely of a makeshift altar on which a wooden sculpture, cracked from heat and

incessant rains that its features were hardly recognizable. The young warrior reached into a pouch at his side and extracted a joss stick which he shoved into the ground. Palms touching, he murmured an unfamiliar Japanese litany, bowing again and again. Nicholas was about to pose the question, but Umeko gently touching his lips with her delicate, manicured fingers and wordlessly urged him to hold his tongue.

After a few more minutes, Akako gestured them off the road and urged them hurriedly to climb the sloping hillside. Nicholas fought his way through the brush, attempting to clear a better pathway so that Umeko would have a better go at the climb. Reaching back, he grasped her hand and helped steady her and the pair struggled up the hill, flanked by Akako who kept looking behind him.

As they reached the top of the hill, Nicholas glanced about him in frustration and fear. Already, the eastern horizon was beginning to flush a tell-tale fuschia, proclaiming the coming sun. However, Akako continued to urge them forward, despite Nicholas' protests regarding the forthcoming sunrise.

Then, they stumbled into an old, abandoned Shinto temple, decrepit from years of exposure to the elements without proper upkeep. The courtyard, wrecked by unruly weeds and untamed, gnarly trees, offered a pooled spring whose water still bubbled pure. Here, Akako and Umeko refilled their vessels while Nicholas explored further ahead of him, into the antechamber of the temple.

Inside, his acute vampire eyes spied reasonable shelter from the destroying rays of the sun, and he immediately claimed this corner, dumping his pack of provisions down and began to settle down for deep sleep. As he arranged an extra cloak under his head as a pillow, he realized that he had not eaten since before he rendezvous with the courtesan at the teahouse. His eyes darted towards the walls behind him that already reflected the rosy hue of a new dawn. He quickly sucked in his breath, realizing that he would have to hunt as soon as dusk arrived. Covering himself up with a black, thickly woven cloak, he curled up in a fetal position, falling instantly asleep, never once thinking of whether he fully trusted Umeko or silent Akako with his secret or his life...

* * * * *

Nicholas woke up instantly in response to the nudge in his ribs. Instinctively, he shot his hand forward, grabbing the wrist which belonged to the second-rank courtesan. For a split second, he did not even recognize her, but as the cobwebs of his deep slumber cleared, he expelled a sigh of relief and collapsed back on the ground. "Please, do not surprise me like that. I might have killed you."

She rubbed her bruised wrist and smiled wryly. "Perhaps, as you have the strength and speed of a samurai. Yet you would not harm me."

Nicholas blinked in disbelief, hardly believing her naivete. There are good reasons to fear me, he thought as he ran his fingers through his unruly hair. Especially as I have not yet eaten...

And there posed the problem. In Edo, blood was abundant and there for the taking. Here, the only mortals within reach were Umeko and the warrior... He shook his head defiantly. Not Umeko. He could not dare betray those deep brown, trusting eyes, for trust was a very precious commodity he had learned to appreciated quite dearly in the past. As for Akako... he was too difficult to read, as if an invisible barrier stood between him and Nicholas, preventing the vampire from second-guessing the hired bodyguard. But Umeko trusted him... and he again faced that dilemma once more.

Packing his gear, he hoisted it onto his shoulders and trudged outside, joining the two Edokko, or residents of Edo, out in the courtyard. Umeko offered Nicholas a rice cake which he politely refused. A confused look clouded

her perfect face but she wordlessly accepted his refusal, and the three carefully picked their way down the side of the steep hill, back onto the Tokaido Road.

After two hours of walking, Nicholas sensed a barely perceptible presence of others about in the shadows beyond. He was about to mention his premonition of trouble when Akako halted, his hand resting on the hilt of the sword. In an almost feral gesture, he sniffed the air and then remained absolutely still... then--

A shot rang out in the darkness, accompanied by shrill war cries. Instantly, the trio found themselves surrounded by scruffy brigands bearing torches that had been previously hidden old crockery. From the circle of fire emerged their leader, clad in moldy and cracked leather armor that had once been a prize salvaged from a battlefield many years before. His bearded face was fierce with a crafty smile that was twisted with scar tissue as he scrutinized the three as if examining a ripe peach for bruising. Then, in a gravely voice, he shouted unintelligible words at Akako.

"What is he saying?" Nicholas whispered to Umeko for translation.

"He says that we are traveling his road and that we must pay the toll."

Akako flicked his thumb, and the long sword clicked a few inches up out of its wooden sheath. He shouted back in a voice that rang with almost tangible power that surprised Nicholas.

"Akako says that he only recognized the Emperor as owner of the illustrious Tokaido Road and only to him will Akako pay homage and tribute."

And the brigand leader thought little of the arrogant comeback. Waving a British-made pistol badly in need of a good oiling and maintenance, he gruffly announced his displeasure at such a response from an unseasoned puppy who thought himself bold enough to challenge the wily and all-powerful Taro, the First Son. The lone samurai only laughed and fully unsheathed the sword.

Ever since Nicholas had wielded his first wooden practice sword, he had well earned the reputation of being very deadly with the blade. And he handled more swords than he could even recall, but never before had he beheld such an unusual sword that now gleamed in the moonlight. But instead of the expected silvery metal, the blade shone darkly, as if greedily consuming the silvery light of the full, cold orb at its highest zenith.

"Do you dare challenge the lethality of the Black Sword?" Umeko translated Akako's challenge.

Taro grinned with ill-kept, black teeth and leveled the pistol point-blank at the warrior's chest. Nicholas reached into his coat, his fingers grasping the handle of his own pistol, but Umeko, as if reading his mind, grabbed him by the elbow and hissed, "Do not shoot! Leave them to fight among themselves!"

Nicholas was about to protest the stupidity on Akako's part, thinking himself invulnerable to a bullet at such close range, but before the words could leave his mouth, the brigand pulled the trigger, but the pistol clicked harmlessly.

"Do you think a mere toy can be used against me?" Umeko translated Akako's taunting words.

Taro howled his frustration and tossed the worthless firearm into the shadows, whipping out his own sword and charging ahead like an enraged bull. Akako waited until he was within sword's length and effortlessly lopped off his head with one, clean sweep. Taro's henchmen immediately ceased their catcalling and stared incredulously as Akako reached down and plucked up the head, displaying it before them.

"I don't believe it..." Nicholas murmured. "How did he know the pistol wouldn't work?..."

Before Umeko could answer, the brigands uttered a simultaneous cry for



J. Gary Gygax '93

revenge and rushed the trio. In a flash, Umeko revealed her *naginata* she had hidden within the folds of her peasant clothes and dealt a fierce blow on the head of the nearest villain. The smell of fresh, flowing blood onto the ground ignited a blood frenzy within Nicholas that even his iron-clad will could not control. Forgetting his masquerade as a mere mortal and answering a more primordial call, he launched forward with vampiric speed, grabbing the nearest throat and with a quick twist, broke it with an audible snap, then he flung the body aside, howling with glee at the ensuing melee.

Three minutes passed when the remnants of the thieves fled on foot, too cowardly to withstand the powerful onslaught of such warriors. But Nicholas seized the opportunity to answer to his growing hunger for blood, for the battle only whetted his appetite to the point that he had to feed or he feared he would attack his two comrade in arms. With a flying leap, he dashed after the retreating figures at such a speed that Umeko's voice shouting his name quickly diminished to nothing. Ahead was his prey, and he could feel its heartbeat in his ears, his blood, and saliva pooled in his mouth with anticipation.

The fleeing brigand had not a chance. One look up and his face transformed into a mask of horror as Nicholas pounced on him and sank his teeth into a bared neck...

Toronto, 1993

The media always knew when they had a story too juicy to ignore, and the Van Helsing murders, as was quickly adopted from the police department's unofficial nickname of the suspect, was the murder sensation of the decade. What titillated the newspapers and television was the theory at the serial killer was a woman! Speculations were not just limited to the journalists, but quickly became the hot trend in comic nightclubs in the downtown district such as: "Q: What was Ms. Van Helsing's defense in why she murdered all those people? A: PMS."

But back at the department headquarters, Stonetree was hardly laughing. Instead, he was glaring at Knight. "I thought you said you had a new lead," he growled at the detective. "And I should congratulate you on your witness's ability to recreate a face, but the Chief is expecting results, and after a week of the media displaying our most wanted poster, you give them the opportunity to taunt your inability to catch this broad when she struck yet again, this time just two blocks from this very building! And now you tell me that you're minus one partner because he's spent the last week watching TV?!"

"Schanke's convinced he's seen her face on the tube," Nick attempted to placate his superior though he was quickly becoming weary of having to bear the brunt of Stonetree's foul temper alone. "I think we should trust his hunch."

The captain pulled out several sheets of accounting forms. "I have no problem with allowing my men to follow hunches, but these bills he's accruing are totally ridiculous. Look, five double pizzas, more Coke than my own kidneys could possibly handle, and now a notice from a furniture rental for a Lazy Boy recliner? You find Schanke and tell him that these expenses are coming out of his paycheck. If his hunch is that good, I'll bet we'll get a quicker result by doing so."

Knight couldn't hide the grin as he returned to his desk to finish up some paperwork when the telephone rang.

"Nick! It's me, Schanke! Quick grab one of the laptop computers with the built-in modem and get your ass down to the CBC archives! I've just discovered the identity of Ms. Van Helsing!"

* * * * *

"You wouldn't believe all the hours of sports I suffered through," Schanke jabbered as he fast-rewound the three-quarter inch broadcasting video tape in the machine. "Now I remember where I saw her. Nine years ago, I was up at a cabin of an old police academy buddy of mine during the time of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. He had one of those fancy satellite dishes, at least fancy back then, installed in his backyard so that he wouldn't have to miss a minute of sports while he was vacationing. Anyway, he managed to tune in the American satellite feed of all the various events, and I remember watching late one night the women's fencing finals."

Here, he hit the play button, and the monitor displayed the floor where two white-uniformed, masked opponents dueled to see who would win the coveted gold medal. "See her?" the detective jabbed his finger at a tall, lithe body that was effortlessly dancing just out of reach of her opponent. "Her name is Diedrae Kelly, and watch this!"

Nick crouched on the floor, his eyes glued to the screen as the woman, after a whirlwind exchange of foils, tossed her opponent's weapon in the air and was declared the winner. Realizing her victory, the woman removed her mask, and the television camera zoomed onto her face, and here Schanke paused the VCR, capturing the woman's features in a clean freeze-frame.

"I know it's been nine years, but wouldn't you say that she and our Ms. Van Helsing look dangerously identical?"

Nick couldn't argue with his partner. There was no way he could deny the similarity that was amazingly close. Without encouragement from Schanke, Knight quickly set up the laptop and plugged in the modem to a nearby phone. Impatiently, Schanke commandeered the keyboard and began pounding in commands and passwords. "There, we're in the department computer system. Now to access the FBI computer. She's American," he answered Knight's unasked question.

Within a few minutes, the two were imputing the woman's name and waiting for the various computer link-ups to crunch up the appropriate information. After ten minutes of staring at a blank screen, the detective scowled as the words NAME NOT FOUND blinked on and off in fluorescent green letters.

"Try TRW," Nick suggested.

"Will do." Again, more commands and passwords, then the modem flashed up the TRW sign board, awaiting for their request. This time they had better luck. "So she's moved to Arizona," Knight murmured.

"And look at that bank account!" Schanke whistled. "I don't think Olympic winners made that kind of dough."

Nick scanned down to the occupational history. "It says here she was a professor at USC... now at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff..."

"But still, professors don't make that kind of dough."

"She has two credit cards -- Mastercard and Visa. Why don't we access them and find out the locations of most recent activity?"

"Good idea," Schanke murmured as he downloaded a copy of the suspect's file into the laptop's memory for future retrieval. He then performed some shortcuts and landed himself in the credit department of Visa. After monkeying around with passwords and a command that would bypass all other security codes, Schanke brought on line Diedrae Kelly's current Visa statement. "Oh, look at this!" he purred.

The last transaction was dated only a few days ago at the Regal Constellation Hotel near the Toronto airport.

* * * * *

"Wonderful," Nick overheard Schanke mutter under his breath, "just what we

need. We're looking for a nefarious suspect at a hotel that's hosting a Star Trek convention, and tonight's Masquerade Night! We'll never recognize her!"

Nick waited patiently for the manager-on-duty that night, and he humorously watched the interaction between a guest that was dressed to the nines in full Klingon battle regalia who was currently embroiled in an argument with one of the employees working behind the hotel registration desk, something regarding the mischarging of a movie that the Klingon hadn't requested on his pay-per-view television option. Despite the late hour of eleven o'clock, the spacious front lobby of the Regal Constellation was bustling as various guests, most dressed in costumes ranging from frank medieval (*With a lot of creator's license*, thought Nick as he remembered what the fashion had truly been way back when) to futuristic space-faring from original work to hard-core Star Trek. People who have such hope for the future, Nick thought. And to think I thought like them so many centuries ago, only to be disillusioned in the fact the human nature seldom changes...

Shaking himself from his grim nostalgia, Knight was relieved when he spied the woman he recognized as the night manager step out of an office in back and approached the front desk. "Detective Knight?" she questioned in hopes for an introduction.

Nick flashed her his badge as identification. "We would like to ask you a few questions in private regarding an investigation we're currently working on."

She gave him a wan smile. "We've been so busy this weekend, that with the convention and such -- not that they're giving us any trouble, so I hope this doesn't involve them. They're pretty harmless."

"Harmless?" Schanke queried, staring at the hulk of the Klingon and his ceremonial sword, discretely sheathed.

"Step this way, gentlemen," she offered as she escorted them behind the desk and towards the back, bypassing the safe deposit boxes and the hotel operator who was madly answering busy lines. Eventually, she gestured them inside a small cubicle, tastefully decorated to make the room feel less like a prison cell, and asked them to be seated. "What can I help you with?"

"We're looking for a woman who is wanted for questioning," Nick began. "According to our sources, she was last seen here a few days ago as a guest in your hotel."

"Her name? If she was indeed here, she would be in our computer."

"Her real name is Diedrae Kelly, though we believe she may not have used her real name. She did pay by credit card, if that might help." He slipped her a piece of paper with a lengthy row of numbers scrawled on it.

The woman accepted the note and studied it intensely. "I don't know if our computers are designed to access names by credit card, but..." She then referred to the monitor on her desk and after a few seconds of rapid typing, she leaned back and sighed, "Sorry, no one by the name of Diedrae Kelly was a guest of ours. Let me contact someone in accounting... I believe one of our accountants might be working late." She then picked up the phone and started dialing.

"Does 'a needle in a haystack' sound appropriate for this situation?" quipped Schanke.

"It's a lead," dead-panned Nick, knowing how few leads ever got him anywhere.

The manager hung up the phone. "Sorry, gentlemen, but Accounting says that the credit card had not been used to pay for hotel reservations... though we cannot discount the possibility she could have paid with cash and had used a false name. However, that credit card number you gave me was used to purchase something at our gift shop -- a bathing suit, it appears. You may wish to return tomorrow morning when the gift shop opens and question our clerks."

Nick rose from his chair and graciously thanked the night manager for her time and help. Once the duo was back out in the lobby, Schanke squawked and side-stepped quickly as a black-and-white dog streaked passed him and out the front doors, closely followed by a distraught woman who was yelling, "Get back here, Skylass!"

"This place is crazy!" Schanke shook his head as his attention focused on a conclave of Klingons who were lounging on sofas in the center atrium. "Did you get a good look at those swords? Any one of them could have killed those people!"

Nick nodded in agreement, realizing the dilemma. Then an interesting thought came to mind. "If this is a convention, then there must be a convention registration table somewhere..."

A gleam appeared in his partner's eyes. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking... Boy, if ol' Stonetree finds out I've switched from being an Idaho couch potato to a Trekkie, he'll--"

"He'll take the funds for your membership to this convention out of your paycheck... just like he'll do with the pizzas and the Lazy Boy recliner," Nick returned pointedly.

"Those were necessities of the job, Nick..."

* * * * *

"Just fill out these cards," the man dressed as a Bajoran instructed behind the three-by-six table that was draped with crepe with "REGISTRATION" emblazoned in large letters on the front. "This will also get you on our mailing list for next year's con."

"'Fen name'?" Nick questioned when he reached that particular line on the card.

"Any nickname or pseudonym you might go by," explained the Bajoran. "Lots of people are known to each other by their fannish names only. They leave their mundane names home for the weekend -- you know, escapism of sorts."

"Just fill it out," Schanke advised his partner as he handed the convention staffmember his card. "Incidentally, I'm supposed to meet a friend of mine here, but because of the airlines triple-booking, I was delayed for over forty-eight hours and missed our rendezvous, and she's probably so mad that she won't speak to me again."

"Oh. What's her name?"

"Diedrae. Diedrae Kelly. She's from Arizona."

"Arizona? Hmm, let's see..." He shuffled through rows of three-by-five cards. "No one by the name of Diedrae Kelly from Arizona... I do have one for a Kali Denver from Arizona. In fact, I believe she's the only member we have from that state."

Nick slapped his forehead with theatrical humiliation. "That's her name! I met her over the computer-net very recently, and only when I got here was I not sure exactly what her name was. Is she here at this hotel?"

At this moment, the convention staffmember stared at him suspiciously. "If she is, I don't have that information available here. If you need to get in touch with her, why not leave a message on the message board other there. She'll eventually run across it and get in touch with you."

"Hey, sounds like a great idea!" Schanke chimed with a little too much boisterousness as he shook the Bajoran's hand and grabbed his membership material, darting over to a giant three-by-five-foot pad of paper supported by a giant easel. With a thick felt-tip pen, he began to scrawl his message.

"Here's your membership ID badge," the convention staffmember replied as he handed it to the vampire in exchange for the registration card and the money.

"Nick Knight, huh? Interesting name. Fannish or real?"
"It's real enough," he assured him.

* * * * *

"You could had been a little more subtle," Nick chastised his partner. "He didn't really believe your computer-net date story."

"But we did get some information, didn't we?" Schanke replied as he ogled a scantily clad fantasy female warrior. "And for a broad who's interested in swords and believes in death to all vampires, I think we're in the right spot. Maybe she'll put in a guest performance tonight, and bam! We'll nab her. If I were her, I wouldn't be able to resist the chance. I mean, wouldn't this be the sort of event that might attract vampires?" And just to prove his point, he gestured at a Count Dracula lookalike from the Coppola movie version, seated at the bar that was decorated in early safari.

"Perhaps," Nick intoned, wondering if his idea was really such a good idea or more of an excuse to do something different with his night than to chase after an elusive murderer. Perhaps here, in a crowd of masqueraders, he might stumble into the infamous Ms. Van Helsing, maybe catch her unawares, if she was in the hotel under an assumed name or with someone else. It was worth a shot. "So, where do we start?"

"There's a late-night panel discussion on vampires in TV and cinema," Schanke suggested.

Somehow, Nick wasn't looking forward to that.

* * * * *

The panel discussion was better than Nick feared, though he was amazed at the trivialities the "panel experts" focused on and the fallacies that continued to be perpetuated. But instead of participating in the debate, he only concentrated on the people who showed up for the midnight gathering. Most, fortunately, did not feel obligated to dress the part; rather, most were middle-aged women, with a few men sprinkled in the crowd, who listened and interacted with a certain level of intelligence that even Nick had to acknowledge. I wonder what Janette would think if she were here, he thought, amused. I bet she could give them a few interesting topics to talk about.

Becoming quickly bored after thirty minutes went by, and realizing that none of the participants struck him as particularly suspicious, he quickly excused himself, leaving Schanke behind as he was enthusiastically bantering with a few convention members nearby, and Nick strolled out into the hallway that was slowly emptying of people.

"Hey!" a Klingon from the far end of the lobby that led to the convention rooms boomed to anyone in particular. "The con suite's just got another shipment of Molsen's!!"

The announcement apparently grabbed a significant number of members' attention as there was a surge of bodies to the nearest elevators. Curious to see what a "con suite" was, Nick allowed himself to swept inside the elevator car, finding himself crammed in with several Klingons in "evening" wear, a few Next Generation officers, and well as a towering Wookie for good measure, many of them desperately needing a good bath. Holding his breath, Nick hoped that their destination wasn't too far away.

The elevator car stopped, and the crowd inside piled out into the crowd outside in the hallway as they slowly migrated to a double-door hotel suite where he could smell the pungent fumes of alcohol and popcorn. Realizing this was just an excuse for a beer-bashing party, Nick quickly dogged back to the

elevator, wondering where he would go from there.

Instead of returning to the main floor, Nick decided to wander the halls on the floors below with the vain hope that he might snag another lead. After all, as wild as Schanke's supposition that the convention of misfits might attract Ms. Van Helsing, the possibility existed. And considering the two detectives' track record regarding the Van Helsing serial killers, he just couldn't ignore any opportunities that might lead him to the capture of this wily suspect.

The fifth floor proved to be less noisy but by no means less busy. He sauntered by open doors where guests spilled into the hallway when space was at a premium. Most casually sipped wine coolers and beer, discussing the latest movie out, so-and-so's most recently published book, the hottest gossip on someone's favorite television show that had recently been canceled... These worlds of fantasy these individuals took as... reality stumped Nick and made him realize how unimaginative he truly must be. Maybe he was a stick-in-the-mud as Natalie often accused him of being whenever she attempted to drag him out of his hermit-like residency to enjoy some real "night life", something he had attempted to isolate himself from.

Suddenly, behind him, he heard a frightful squawk followed by a high pitched keening that he immediately recognized meaning death. With lightning speed, he raced to the source of the cries that was soon amplified by others. Spinning around a corner, he drew himself to a quick stop when he was almost bombarded by a crowd gathering around the doorway of an open suite, the air punctuated by gasps and screams of horror.

"Someone call the police!" an authoritative voice rang out above the raucous cries.

At last, someone is using his head, Nick thought as he whipped out his ID and held it up as he squeezed his way between the crush of bodies all eager to see the contents of the room. But just as he was about to clear the throng, a lean, hard body slid passed his, darting out into the hallway. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the profile which made him forget the horror he was expecting to see in the room.

That face! It's her!

He wrenched himself back, twisting around to try to worm his way back out of the crowd, wishing desperately he could literally take a flying leap over these mortals' heads in order to catch his quarry. He ignored the occasional elbow in the ribs and the accidental stomp on the foot, but by the time he reached the perimeter of the crowd, the suspect was gone.

Concentrating hard for his acute vampire ears to pick up the sounds of retreating feet on carpet, he was rewarded with a possibility -- down the corridor towards the elevators. Without another thought, he raced down the hallway, just in time to see the door leading to the stairwell click shut.

I have you now! he thought triumphantly as he flung the door open and was rewarded by the echoing sounds of retreating feet. This time, he threw caution to the wind and gracefully leaped over the handrail, floating down one floor, then the next, suddenly planting himself in front of the fugitive and grabbing her wrist with a grip that could break bone.

She let out a shriek of surprise, teetering back until her knees buckled out from beneath her, sending her down onto the cement step with a painful thump. It was then Nick was able to fully take in her features, and he knew his instincts were correct.

She definitely was Diedrae Kelly.

"Let me go!" she hissed, attempting to twist away from his hold.

"I don't think so, Ms. Kelly."

The mere mention of her surname caused her eyes to widen. "How could you know my name? Nobody knows that's my real name!"

Knight's eyes alighted on a name tag that some adventurous artist had embellished with a water-color rendition of a samurai warrior. Printed in neat letters was the name "Kirstin MacGuire". "So what name are you registered under?" he casually asked.

"Who the hell are you? And let me go!" she demanded emphatically, attempting to twist her wrist out of his grasp, but he only clenched down harder, causing her to squawk in pain. "You don't understand! I don't have any time to waste!"

"Oh, I completely understand," Nick returned coolly, pulling her to her feet. "You're coming with me for questioning."

"Questioning?" Then she closed her eyes and expelled a sigh of aggravation. "You don't think I had anything to do with--"

"We'll find out at the station. Now, will you come with me quietly?"

"You're making a big mistake. I'm not the person you want. If you come with me before the bastard escapes, maybe we'll find him. He couldn't have gotten very far--" With a sudden burst of energy, she torqued her wrists sharply and slipped from his grasp, stomping on his foot in hopes to incompacitate him before dashing down the stairs towards the emergency exit.

Though the pain shooting up his leg was not unbearable, his pride was definitely bruised. Uttering a primal yell that echoed through the stairwell like a banshee, he zoomed down the steps, reaching forward to grab a handful of flying hair belonging to the retreating woman and yanked back. Falling down, she howled in pain as he jerked her to her feet with shoulder-socket-wrenching strength and slammed her face into the wall.

"All right," he growled in her ear as he slapped handcuffs on her wrists before she could pull free. "You now have the right to remain silent--"

Her eyes flashed with a wildness he hadn't seen in a mortal's eyes in quite a while. "Goddammit! Don't you understand? He's getting away! If we don't go after him, he'll kill someone else, and I can't live with that anymore!"

"We'll have plenty of time to discuss the matter back at the station." He then whipped out a small walkie-talkie from his hip pocket. "Schanke, Knight. Call for back-up and get up to the fifth floor, suite 513. Another homicide. I'll meet you later at the Caddy. We've caught our woman."

* * * * *

By the time Nick rendezvous with his partner, the hotel entrance was swarming with police and forensics personnel who had now barricaded the fifth floor and was restricting entering and exiting the hotel. Dr. Lambert and her assistants had just arrived in the white coroner's van, and Natalie was directing her underlings with the equipment they would be lugging upstairs to the murder scene. Schanke scrambled through the revolving doors and made a beeline to the sixty-two Coup de Ville that was parked near a black-and-white police car where Knight was exchanging words with a uniformed police officer.

"See! I told you we would strike gold! Didn't I tell you? You won't believe the brouhaha that's erupted upstairs! They say that someone arrested Kirsten MacGuire for murder! Now who the hell would do such a thing? Probably some green, paranoid rookie made the bust."

Nick and the officer exchanged knowing glances. "And who is Kirsten MacGuire?" Knight inquired innocently.

"Only the hottest science fiction and fantasy writer in the past couple of years. She's won both the Nebula and Hugo awards last year for her latest book called The Samurai's Gambit. Really good stuff, guaranteed to cause insomnia until you finish it. Now who did you get, Nick?"

The detective jabbed his finger towards the escape-proof back seat of the

black-and-white. "Take a look for yourself."

Schanke did just that, pressing his face against the tinted, sound- and bullet-proof glass, peering at the figure inside the car. "Hot damn! It is Diedrae Kelly! So she really was here after all! How the hell couldn't we track her down..." Then his eyes rested upon the name tag still attached to the bedraggled, fuming woman who, after realizing that shouting was utterly useless, became viciously mute. "Kirsten MacGuire?" He spun around and stared blankly at Nick. "You mean Diedrae Kelly and Kirsten MacGuire are the same person?" He then remembered his previous criticism. "Sorry, Nick. I just never dreamed... Sorry I missed the major action."

"It's all right, partner. As it was, the capture was hardly exciting."

"She's handcuffed up pretty good."

"Of course. After all, one of the charges is assaulting a police officer."

"She assaulted you?" Schanke sputtered humorously. "Her?"

"If she's capable of killing eight people, she's more than qualified to assault a police officer," the uniformed officer quipped.

"Let's get her out of here and down to the station before we are assaulted by reporters," Nick advised as he peered over Schanke's shoulder and noted the local television news van pull up and park in front in a no-parking zone.

* * * * *

Schanke yawned widely and rubbed his eyes methodically. "Let's go over this again," he droned as he tried to keep his eyes focused upon the woman confined to the chair on the other side of the table in the interrogation room. "Where were you around twelve midnight?"

"For the third time, I was to meet a friend of mine at his hotel room," the tall, athletic woman responded wearily though she was hardly over her annoyance. She brushed back waist-length gold-brown hair behind her left ear, strands of which refused to obey her wish and continued to drape back over her eyes. Her deep grey eyes, however, flashed angrily. "We were to go out and do some bar-hopping and talk about old times."

"Is there anyone who can verify your story?" Nick inquired.

She gave him a perturbed look. "I'm hardly a child to be required to inform someone of every single move I make."

"In other words, no," Schanke sighed.

"Look, why would I have killed Harrison? What motive could I possibly have?"

"You tell me."

Eyes rolled towards the ceiling, then she cradled her head in her arms on the table. "Please, I've told you everything. I went to Harrison's room and used the key he gave me in case he hadn't come back upstairs from the convention in time. I opened the door and walked in. The door to the adjoining bedroom was partly open, so I thought he hadn't shown up. I waited for a few minutes before I thought I smelled something odd. I walked into the bedroom and found him..." There was a long pause, then, "Shit, why did it happen to him?"

Nick was torn between compassion for her because of her loss or skepticism at possible crocodile tears. He usually prided himself with uncanny skills of judging possible truths mixed with deceptions, but this woman... she confounded him with nothing he could use to say one way or the other -- except his gut feeling nagged that she knew much more than she was telling.

"Then why were you running from the scene?"

"Because... I thought I might catch the guy who did this! How many times have I told you that?"

"Too many times," Schanke mumbled. "Nick, why don't we call it a night?"

Knight glanced at the clock which read a quarter till five, and he slammed down his little black book of case notes. "Might as well," he grumbled. "Officer, take Ms. Kelly back to her cell."

"Wait a minute," she protested, "unless you have already filed formal charges, there's no way I'm staying in a cell, least of all here and overnight."

"Sorry, sweetheart," Schanke yawned again and he wandered to the door and peeked out. "Bail's to be set and it won't happen any sooner than tomorrow morning. Until then, *me casa, su casa*.

The woman rose stiffly, glaring at the two detectives. "It won't be long when you discover that you've made a *big* mistake. I'm not whom you're looking for, and when the next murder occurs, you'll know I was right all along."

"Don't count on it, babe," Schanke smirked as the woman was escorted out. "Well, Knight, what do you think?"

"I think she still has a lot more to tell us," he confided with his partner.

"You're telling me. Here's a woman who, by her own words, a very dear friend, and I don't see her grieving. In fact, you saw her acting cool and collected at the scene of the murder. Hardly a testimony to an everlasting friendship."

"So far, we only have her word that she and the victim were close personal friends. We'll need to check that out as well as get Laura Helfer back here for the line-up. If she correctly identifies our Ms. Kelly," Nick then smiled, "we're in luck."

Japan, 1885.

Nicholas' stomach rumbled with utter contentment as he lowered the now empty shell of a body to the ground next to the thief that made up his first part of a two-course meal. A leisurely warmth stole up on him, an expected effect in the aftermath of serious blood engorgement, one he hoped would last him to the completion of his quest. *Perhaps it will be the last I will need...* he thought as he wiped his mouth of the ill-gotten crimson. He glanced down at his clothes, realizing his garments were soaked with blood. *How am I to explain this to Umeko?*

Now, languidly, he leaped into the air, feeling the cool breeze caress his skin, as his night-penetrating eyes sought his goal -- two figures below scurrying about the wide, well-trodden road. Not wishing to be seen, he dropped back down to the ground behind thick overgrown and forged a pathway back to the Tokaido Road.

Umeko, despite her years of training, was openly relieved to see him. Akako, however, expressed no emotion, however Nicholas could feel his piercing, accusing stare now. But instead of interrogating the foreigner, the warrior only motioned forward and set a very rigorous pace that even Umeko had problems keeping up with the guide.

Two hours passed, and the second-rank courtesan was showing signs of tiring. When Nicholas asked her to ask Akako to slow down, she only shook her head in refusal. "We have been delayed. If we are to reach shelter in time, then we must -- Oof!" She tumbled head-first to the ground when she tripped over an unseen rock.

"Then let me help," he offered as he scooped her up and perched her rump on his shoulder. She squealed with surprise when she realized her advantage point, and Nicholas was amazed on how small and light she was. Never would he have guessed that under the bulky peasant clothes, or her flowing silk kimonos, that she was so slender... so delicate...

Akako paused, glancing up at the spectacle behind him, and then only

grumped his bemusement but continued down the road, this time without any further hindrance.

* * * * *

Three hours before dawn, the trio veered westward from the Tokaido Road and up a small pathway that wound itself up a small range of mountains. The territory grew bleaker as the fertile flora and inquisitive night fauna dwindled away to gravely moutaininside studded with spindly plants that could survive such barrenness. Nicholas nervously scanned the skies, anxiously witnessing the blackness of night slowly transform to a deep midnight blue, heralding the coming of a new day. But now, he had more confidence in his guide, as proven the night before, to be trustworthy to protect him from the deadly rays of the sun.

However, minutes ticked by, and the eastern horizon grew brighter until Nicholas was forced to cover himself with his heavy black wool cloak. Akako muttered a few guttural words which were rapidly translated by Umeko. "Just a few more moments," she encouraged. "We are almost there."

"There" was a dark crack in the mountainside, flanked by currents of loose gravel. Akako was first to disappear into its black maw, and Nicholas, almost feeling the thin blood in his skin boil, darted in and expelled a breath of relief in the cool cavern's air.

Tallow candles, cupped in handcarved outcroppings in the stone wall, flickered dimly but enough for mortal eyes to see by once they adjusted to the grayness. Shadows danced on the walls as the candles trailed away down a lone corridor. Far in the background, Nicholas could hear the sounds of dripping water and chirping blind crickets. In three quick strides, Akako approached the wall and commandeered a candle, waving to Nicholas and Umeko, who just entered the cavern, to follow.

"This is a little known shrine built three hundred years ago," Umeko chronicled as they delved deeper into darkness, only the single flame of the fat candle lighting the way. "Many wise priests lived here to meditate and gain wisdom. Here, the Ancient One may hear your story and offer you advice on how you may end your curse."

At this point, Akako halted before step in native stone, carved by artisans, that ascended upward. Here, he picked up a small, metal hammer and hit the rim of a copper bell of a rich green patina. The pure chime echoed throughout the cavern and deep within, Nicholas could hear more bells answering its call. Satisfied, Akako set the hammer aside and peeled out of the pack on his back, gesturing the other two to do likewise.

"Here," Umeko translated, "we sleep."

* * * * *

Nicholas slept fitfully, his dreams full of dread and guilt, blood and torn flesh. At one point, he found himself cradling the motionless body of the second-rank courtesan, his face dripping with warm blood, her neck torn open to the bone...

He screamed and woke up with a jolt, only to discover a wizened face peering over him. The vampire sucked in a deep breath, beholding a very old man wrapped in white cloth, his head shaven, his feet bare, but what startled Nicholas the most was the Ancient's eyes. Muddy brown eyes partially clouded with white stared straight through him, and though Nicholas was certain the man's was very limited, he could not shake off the feeling that his soul was being carefully scrutinized and there was no corner hidden from this man.

The priest turned his head towards Umeko and muttered several words in a raspy voice. The courtesan nodded. "He says that you are hungry and that he will give you food."

Nicholas shook his head. "Please tell him that I... I cannot intrude on his hospitality that my..." He trailed off. What could he say? How could he explain that nothing but blood would satisfy his hunger cravings?

Umeko laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and pushed him back onto his bedroll. "You cannot refuse. It would be... impertinent to do so. How can you accept his advice if you cannot accept his hospitality?"

Nicholas groaned as his head hit his makeshift pillow. There was no way out. His internal clock told him that it was still light outside, and here he was trapped until night approached. The feast provided by the two thieves had not sustained him as he thought it should, and he now felt the stirrings of hunger ripple through his body. He rolled onto his side, facing away from Umeko, and closed his eyes, hoping he could ignore the feral call for blood.

The old man returned later, and kneeling down beside Nicholas, nudged his shoulder until he finally rolled over. A large drinking bowl was thrust into his hands, and a familiar scent curled around the vampire's nose.

Blood!

Nicholas stared wildly at the old man, then at Umeko.

The old man smiled. "Kyuketsuki."

Umeko gasped, hands fluttering to her face.

"What did he say?" demanded Nicholas as it dawned on him that the old priest knew exactly what he was. Whatever 'Kyuketsuki' meant, it had instantly shattered the rapport of companionship he had established with the courtesan.

"He said," a new voice rang out from the darkness, "that you are a vampire."

Nicholas' head whirled as he recognized the voice... though he had only heard it speak Japanese before.

Into the circle of light stepped Akako, but now the wide-brim cane hat was removed, and rich, blue-black hair cascaded down over shoulders to the waist. But those eyes... He did not fail to recognize those eyes.

"You are a woman," he breathed as he gazed at Akako in amazement. "I thought you were a man... I didn't know you knew..."

"English?" she finished, eyes flashing with mockery.

Unsteadily, he rose to his feet, his hands clenched tightly and his body froze defensively. At her side, he could see the deadly sword she had wielded with superb skill, however it was still debatable who would win if it was a life-or-death struggle between the two. And even now, he could see about two inches of naked blade protruding from above the sheath, ready for action.

But the priest raised his hand, ending whatever silent hostilities were present. His face softened as he gazed back at Nicholas and gestured him to drink. The enticing aroma wafting under his nose was too strong, and without further encouragement, Nicholas drained the bowl, only to have another one placed in his hands.

After a total of four bowls were consumed, Nicholas shook his head, indicating that he was sated. The old man smiled and collected the empty bowls, setting the pile aside. Then, settling himself in a lotus position before the vampire, he took hold of Nicholas' hand and held it as he talked to him.

"H-h-he wants to know if you now feel better," Umeko awkwardly explained, her eyes shimmering uneasily, but then she turned her head, breaking off visual contact.

His spirits sagged. Again, rejection. And from someone who had so eagerly wished to help him.

Again the priest spoke, only now Akako translated. "He wishes to know why

you have sought him out."

"I... I don't want to be what I am," he stammered under her piercing glare. He then gave the ancient man a beseeching look, a silent plea for help.

"He wishes to know why you became what you are," the warrior woman intoned.

"I... I... I was tempted by the power... and was seduced to think that I wanted that power."

The cavern was silent for several long minutes, except for the constant dripping of water.

Again, the frail voice uttering Japanese. "He wishes to know what you are willing to do to cancel the curse."

Nicholas was about to bluntly respond "Anything!" but suddenly became silent as he was suddenly skeptical regarding what could be considered as a reversal of a curse. "I want to become mortal again, to live a mortal life and die an old man."

"Everyone would want a full life," Akako injected cynically. "How many have you ended earlier than foretold?"

"Do not be so cruel to him!" Umeko interrupted suddenly and unexpectedly. "Can you not see he wishes to do better?"

This sudden reversal of opinion stunned Nicholas, but as he gazed at the courtesan for explanation, he saw endless compassion in her eyes, perhaps a little pity, but still she fought to find some hint of goodness left within him, despite the unnatural creature he had become. Perhaps there was still hope...

"You are always the soft-hearted one," Akako snapped impatiently. "Only because Great Aunt Matsuko was in constant vigilance so that you would not be taken advantage of have you enjoyed the success befitting a second-rank geisha. And now you bring a creature of the dead to Great Uncle's doorstep as if you have found a poor, lost puppy. I had suspicions, but--"

The elderly priest barked angry words at Akako who instantly shut up, but her eyes still smoldered. Without a word, she stiffly turned heel and disappeared into the shadows.

A gentle, well-manicured hand touched Nicholas' face. "I see now why you wish to seek Great Uncle," she spoke in her velvety soft voice that cut through the vampire's emotional defenses. His larger, rougher hand caught hers and held it carefully, tenderly.

Again, the priest babbled several sentences, appearing agitated, before he wandered off into the blackness. "What did he say?" Nicholas asked.

"He says there is much to do before dusk, however, by the next sunrise, you may greet it as a new man."

Toronto, 1993

Several thick folders plummeted onto Knight's desk with a reverberating thud. "Finger print reports in, Nick, and hers match those found at all the murders!" Schanke bubbled. "Oh, just wait until Stonetree sees this! It'll stop his bitching about unconventional expenses we've accrued on this case!"

"They match? Every murder scene?" Nicholas inquired in disbelief. "But what about the weapon? Hasn't anyone found the damned murder weapon?"

The question adequately burst Schanke's bubble. "Uh... not yet, but I'm sure they will! I mean, it has to be somewhere because she didn't have enough time to properly dispose it."

"If we don't find the murder weapon, then all we have is circumstantial evidence. It won't hold up."

"That sword will be found," Schanke reassured him. "And if not, we have enough circumstantial evidence to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was at the scene of all the murders. Forensics has searched her hotel room.

There's more than enough evidence to put her away for life! Blood on clothes -- including type AB-negative which was White's blood type. Now you don't call that a coincidence, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"And one more thing, so that your mind could rest, they uncovered three, count 'em, three swords in her room. All of them with functioning blades, not those dull ornamental ones you find in old antique stores. We're talking about killers. Forensics is just starting the testing on them. Ten-to-one they'll find blood -- blood that matches."

"Yeah," Nick muttered as he picked up a transcript of the interrogation of the suspect. He scanned through the first twenty pages, then tossed it onto an evergrowing pile of paperwork on his desk. "I think we should pay another visit to Diedrae Kelly and see if she would like to amend her story. Perhaps the twenty-four hours behind bars might have convinced her to be a little more talkative."

* * * * *

When Knight and Schanke entered the interrogation room, they were greeted by Janice Landstrand, legal aid lawyer. She smiled sweetly, but Nick was well enough acquainted with her to know she had a few surprises in store for them. "Welcome, gentlemen. If you don't mind, I would like to sit in this little discussion for the sole purpose of protecting my client's rights."

"Oh, please do so," Knight grinned magnanimously as he settled down in a nearby chair.

The door to the interrogation room opened, and Diedrae Kelly was escorted in by a female officer. She glanced at Nick, then Landstrand with confusion.

The solicitor didn't miss a beat. "Remember what we talked about earlier, Ms. Kelly. You don't have to answer any of their questions," the sunblond woman in the narrow-skirted power suit prompted the bemused woman. "And unless these men have sufficient evidence to link you with the serial murders, then they can't hold you here against your will."

"We still have her on an assault charge," Schanke reminded the slick lawyer.

"And I'm sure that the judge will understand that it was just a misunderstanding."

"Try again, Janice," Knight's partner sparred. "Why don't you ask your client why her fingerprints have been found at all the murder scenes?"

Landstrand's eyes quickly darted over to the suspect. "My client doesn't have to tell you anything."

"Then I think you need to have a long talk with your client about certain evidence that's recently come up. For example, a few minutes ago, we were informed that one of Kelly's swords which, as she has stated, are merely for ornamental reasons has remnants of AB negative blood."

"I have AB negative blood," the woman calmly stated.

"Oh," Schanke replied, somewhat disappointed. "But why should there be your blood on the blades, hmm?"

"You're the one who said he's read all my books."

"What was that to mean?" Nick inquired of his partner.

"In The Samurai's Gambit, one of the characters in the book would 'feed' his most prized sword with his own blood to maintain its potency," Schanke explained. "I wouldn't think you'd believe your own fairy tales."

"I don't have to tell you anything," the woman replied coolly.

Nick planted both palms on the table and stared down at the suspect. "There are eight people dead, and the evidence so far points to you. Are you

sure you don't have anything to say to us?"

She adamantly shook her head. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Fine. Officer, escort her back to holding."

* * * * *

When the media caught wind of the arrest of Ms. Van Helsing, they went wild. Not only was she a renown writer ("Winner of the 1992 Nebula and Hugo Awards," quoted a news anchorperson), but a mole for the *Toronto Sun* planted at the station managed to unearth the suspect's true name, and the tabloids and newspapers splattered her entire life on the front pages, going as far as sending reporters to Flagstaff to interview departmental professors. Apparently, she had to have lived the archetypal Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde life -- a respected professor in the English department, a fascinating writer, and gold medalist in the 1984 Summer Olympics in the foil category, what else? The phones at the police station were ringing off their hooks from admirers, disillusioned fans, run-of-the-mill crackpots, bereaved family members of the victims, and representatives from one network and two movie companies all vying for exclusive rights to her sordid story.

Nick grimaced as he read the headlines. As of yet, Diedrae Kelly had not been formally charged, pending on the arrival of Laura Hefler who had agreed to return to Toronto to participate in the line-up. If she failed to correctly identify the suspect, then he and the department would be the laughingstock of law enforcement, proving to be just as inadequate as Scotland Yard during the massive Jack the Ripper manhunt.

However, Knight's instinct, which rarely failed him and had been responsible for keeping him alive so long so far, still affirmed the fact that he wasn't mistaken. It was just a matter of getting her to confess or go through a lengthy trial and winding up with the same verdict. As it was, Janice Landstrand was remarkably tight-lipped about the entire affair, and even she appeared very nervous now when she was in the presence of her client. But despite the expert advice of her appointed lawyer, Diedrae Kelly refused to assert her right to force the precinct's hand to declare formal charges, almost preferring the isolation of her lone cell which had now become home rather than in holding where already two threats on her life had been made by fellow criminals.

Four days after Kelly's arrest, Laura Hefler arrived via rail to Toronto, and she was literally swept off the train platform by police, escorting her through vulture-like journalists and TV reporters who managed to pick up the tip that she was in town. One hour later, she was perched on the edge of her seat, staring at the line-up of women, ranging from five-foot-four to six-foot-seven, all wearing trenchcoats with hair pulled back. The buyer carefully studied each face with great care, as if she were back in Minneapolis, choosing the next season's fashion wear that would either make or bankrupt her stores. After five minutes, she sighed. "It's her -- number six."

"Are you absolutely certain?" the chief of police questioned.

"Most definitely. I'll never forget her face -- or her eyes -- as long as I live."

* * * * *

"You heard the news?!" Schanke inquired excitedly as he straddled the chair and faced Nick's desk.

"Yes, I heard -- Kelly was successfully ID'ed."

"And she's up without bail. Zilch. Noughta. I guess we can forego the

assault charge now. Kinda small potatoes, wouldn't you say?"

It was then Stonetree poked his head out of his glass cubicle he called his office. "Knight! Schanke! In here -- now!"

"I wonder what's eating him now?" Schanke pondered aloud. "I mean, we did apprehend the infamous Ms. Van Helsing herself. Unless he finally got my last expense bill..."

"The Lazy Boy?"

"The store wouldn't take it back, so what else was I going to do? Myra hates my taste in furniture and as far as she's concerned, she completely satisfied with our stuffy antique furniture that doesn't recline."

But to Schanke's relief, their boss had something else in mind. "Just got word from a friend in the justice department. Kelly is refusing to see her lawyer and has effectively fired her. Typical, I suppose, for an American. The point is that she's without representation and until another legal aid lawyer is appointment, she's up for grabs."

"Why the change of heart?" Nick inquired.

"My friend says that her lawyer recommended a psychiatric evaluation, and Kelly most adamantly refused to the point of almost becoming hysterical. If she's about to crack, I want you two there. As it is, she's scheduled to be transferred out of here tomorrow morning, so let's see if you can get lucky."

"Luck's my middle name," Schanke remarked with pompous flair.

"You're only luck was happening to play couch potato during the 1984 Olympics," Stonetree shot back, "and the department's not paying for the Lazy Boy, and that's final!"

* * * * *

When Knight first caught a glimpse of Kelly, he was stunned by the dark discoloration encircling her blood-shot eyes and her thinning face. She sat quietly at the table, hands folded in front of her, shoulders squared, as if she were about to face a firing squad. Nick gestured at the accompanying officer to leave the interrogation room, knowing that full security would be maintained by the close-circuit television that would most likely be taping this session.

"You look tired," the detective commented.

"Haven't slept since you arrested me," came the bland answer.

"Why not?"

A small spark of defiance glimmered in her stormy grey eyes. "Is there anything to be truly happy about? I've received no less than eleven death threats, my parents have disowned me, my last living brother won't speak to me, and today I received a letter from my publishers stating that they are no longer interested in hearing from me ever again. More than likely, my tenure at NAU has now been canceled since being arrested for murder is enough to terminate tenure. My ex-lawyer thinks I loony-tunes and was trying to get a guilty but by means of temporary insanity. Think about it -- after eight murders, do you think such a stupid justification would convince the jurists? That is, if you guys have trial by jury."

"Then why don't you tell me what really happened."

"I told you, I didn't kill them!"

"There's too much evidence saying that you did."

"Ah, but that's circumstantial evidence. You haven't found the murder weapon, have you?"

Schanke grinned. "We don't need to find the murder weapon to get a conviction. Circumstantial evidence that is without reasonable doubt is enough to do the job."

The woman paled. "I guess there's a lot of Canadian criminal law that I'm

not familiar with."

"Then why don't you tell us what really happened," Nick repeated.

The woman rubbed her irritated eyes wearily. "If I do, you'll react just the way my ex-lawyer reacted -- 'She's definitely a few Chicken McNuggets shy of a Happy Meal'."

"Try us," Schanke encouraged.

"I guess there's nothing else to lose now, and things are guaranteed only to get worse, anyway." She pursed her lips together as a look of ponderance froze her features. "Less than a year ago, my home was broken into, and several important personal belongings were stolen, most importantly, an old Japanese sword."

The mention of the weapon pricked Nick's memory with a vengeance.

"Naturally, I reported the theft to the Flagstaff police, but much good that did. The fool in charge of the investigation was a drunken sot and had a tendency to pick up women who looked dangerously close to jailbait, and he did diddly-squat to find the culprit. So I took matters in my own hands. I've been trailing the person who stole the sword all the way from Flagstaff, and here's where I ended up."

"Are you saying this thief is responsible for all eight murders here?" Schanke questioned in disbelief.

"Positive. That's why you've found my fingerprints at the scene of the murders. I'm on his heels, but I'm never there quick enough to get him."

"And what would you do if you found him?" Nick questioned impulsively.

"Get my sword back," she replied with deadly earnest.

"That's it?" Schanke inquired with some skepticism.

"That's all I would need to do."

There was something very disquieting about that last response that even sent chills up and down Nick's spine. "Who is this man?"

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know it's even a man doing these murders?"

"I just know it is."

"That isn't a very convincing answer," Schanke commented.

"It's the best I can give you right now."

"Then how could you have supposedly trailed this man all the way from Arizona?"

"The newspapers, for starters. People die in the cities he's at. Denver, Colorado. St. Louis, Missouri. Kansas City, Missouri. Chicago, Illinois -- there he did quite a bit of damage in Chinatown there, but he left before I got a good fix on him. Then it was Detroit in the DMZ. I had a hell of a time keeping up with him because he doesn't necessarily need to kill very often, at least back then. Now he's acting like a drug addict, needing a fix more and more often. You've noticed how he's getting more sloppy with each murder lately."

"But still manages to evade capture."

"So did Jack the Ripper, but I'll eventually find him, or die trying."

Nick attempted another approach. "Can you describe him?"

"I wish I could give you a physical description, but the best I can do is that he must be someone originating from the west coast because only a limited number of people know I had this sword. Someone who makes ancient swords a hobby of his. He may be insane, but he certainly isn't stupid. On the outside, he'll be very with it and is actually quite polite, or so said people who apparently met him."

"That isn't much of a description," Schanke responded critically. "That can describe anyone here in Toronto."

"He certainly isn't Canadian!" she snapped. "However, I don't know why he

decided to come here. There's too much of a chance of leaving a sufficient paper trail -- like how you found me." She gave a wan smile at Schanke who almost immediately puffed up with pride.

"So the true serial murderer is a man who stole your sword whom you've been pursuing for the past year," Nick summarized.

"Yes, that's it in a nutshell."

Knight gave her an enigmatic, but mocking, smile. "And that's all? Why didn't you tell us in the first place?"

"I told you back in the stairwell at the Regency Constellation that we might catch the murderer, but no! You fussed around like I was your Ms. Van Helsing, allowing him to get away!"

"It's been four days now," Schanke reminded her. "Why hasn't this mystery man struck again?"

The woman sunk back with a gloomy expression on her face. "I don't know," she whispered.

* * * * *

"I bet I know what's going on," Schanke theorized as he flopped down in a chair in front of Nick who was busily typing out his backlog of investigation reports. "I bet she has that multiple personality disorder. This phantom killer is really her, that is, when she switches to that persona."

"Did you check out that list of cities she gave us?"

"The places where she alleges this mystery man killed for pleasure? You bet. Not a single word checks out, Nick. I even went back as far as ten years just to be certain. No cases of decapitation by sword, dismemberment, stakes through the chest, and/or garlic stuffing. However, I did find credit card reimbursements at most of those locales during the last year, so she's being truthful in that regard."

"Then why do I have this gut feeling that there is more going on than she's letting on?" Nick pondered, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers. "That sword..."

Schanke watched his partner's eyes narrow into brooding, and was about to say something when the phone rang. "Knight here."

"Nick? It's Natalie. Thought you'd want to be the first to know. I just finished the preliminaries, and Kelly's blood is most likely the blood found on the swords in her possession. Not only is she type AB-negative, but she has a few weird antibodies that White's blood sample doesn't have. And after putting the swords through the works, I don't think they could have chopped off anybody's head with the same neatness as the one used on the victims."

"In other words, there's reasonable doubt," Nick muttered, and Schanke groaned in reply.

"I'm just telling it like it is, Nick. If you guys could find the sword that did the damage, I probably could find good evidence that'll hold in court. Right now, all you have are fingerprints."

"Damn... Thanks anyway, Nat." He then hung up the phone.

"Bad news, huh?"

"There's just too many loose ends. Even Janice could raise a lot of legitimate objections that would cast doubt on the circumstantial evidence we've collected. If only we could find that sword!!"

Japan, 1885.

Nicholas tolerated the request to completely strip his body of all garments though a modesty he had thought long dead asserted itself, making him

uncomfortable. However, lying on the rough-hewn stone floor and holding still while the ancient priest painted characters from nose to the sole of his feet was more than he could hold still for. The fine brush hairs tickled him to the point of distraction, and he fidgeted despite the old man's admonitions and scowls. Umeko, who watched on, only smiled in amusement. "Keep still, Nickosan. He is writing powerful prayers to protect you from the sun."

His eyes fluttered wide open. "Am I walk into the full sunlight and hope that these... these runes will protect me?" he sputtered, flabbergasted.

She quickly translated to the priest who only shook his head and muttered several phrases in his creaky, old voice. "Great Uncle says that the prayers offer much more. They are like... like great spells to reverse the curse. But there is much more than just painted prayers."

Nicholas hoped she and the old priest were correct. He had gone on so many fool's errands to find the elusive cure to his vampirism that not much shocked him anymore, except... Perhaps there was some sense in the wizened priest's idea. Vampires died in the light of the sun. If there was some way to survive such a full-front assault, perhaps the cleansing rays would rid him of the humors that maintained the curse. If he could survive the sunlight...

Akako kept out of the way, being a lone shadow that his eyes alone could plainly see. It seemed strange, Nicholas thought to himself, how the darkness of night and the sheer blackness of the cave suited her. For a brief moment, he entertained the notion that she would make a good vampire, if she wasn't one already. He seldom met female warriors who projected such sheer will as Akako did. And seeing her in action against the brigands, he wondered how well she would fare against LaCroix if he happened to catch wind of Nicholas' scheme.

To his amazement, a coldness crept into his bones, bones that never complained of the cold since he joined the ranks of the Undead. He ventured to touch his fingers to his face, to see if they, too, were warm, but the old priest swatted his attempt, and Nicholas, like a chastened child, resumed his poise of death as the ancient continued with his work.

Finally, the priest put down his brushes and ink and rocked back on his heels, inspecting his work. Then, when he found a yet untouched patch of skin, he quickly scribbled more cryptic characters until satisfied. He then produced a pouch of white chalky powder and sprinkled a large circle around Nicholas' supine body. Once that task was completed, he then brought out three large metal bowls, each filled with a thick, charcoal grey paste. Setting one at Nicholas' head and the other two by his feet, he then ignited the three with the flame of a tallow candle, and brilliant blue-white light, as strong as the sun's own, erupted, illuminating the cathedral-sized cavern with blinding light.

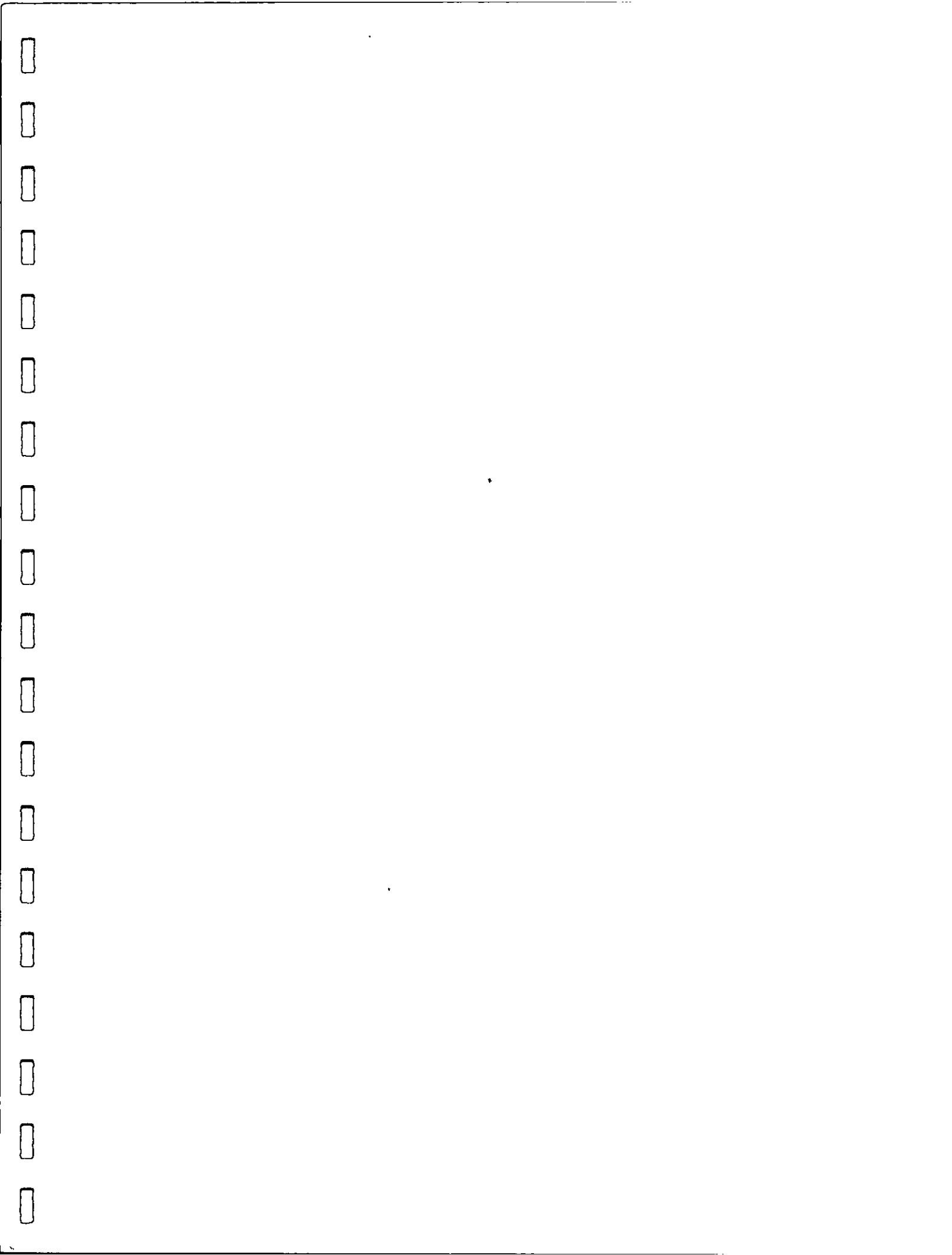
Nicholas cried out, the brilliance sending shards of pain through his eyes despite his efforts to squeeze them shut.

"Remain still!" he overheard Umeko's voice above his own terror. "You must remain still!"

He forced the panic to retreat, and realizing that he was still unharmed, he drew a deep breath and focused his mind on the fact that he was able to withstand the light that though it was not that of the sun's, it was the brightest he had managed to survive so far.

The priest began a droning chant in a sing-song voice as he plodded around the circle. Over and over and over again the same guttural words that spun in Nicholas' head. A lazy stupor soon enveloped his body, and he felt himself floating away in the light surrounding him. Up and up and up...

Like a spear, a scream pierced the darkness, jolting Nicholas out of the tranquil state of hypnosis. Leaping to his bare feet, he was in time to witness Umeko being snatched up into the air, and the cavern echoed with heinous laughter. A black-cloaked figure dropped onto the stone floor and flung off the





hood that covered his features. Nicholas cringed when he recognized the face of his vampiric mentor and nemesis. Around him, dropped four more Undead, two he recognized. The other two...

"Chasing your idiot dream again, I see," LaCroix smirked, giving his pale blond head a shake of disapproval as he strolled closer for a more detailed look. "I like the body paint."

From behind, Umeko squealed again, and Nicholas saw her struggling in the arms of Benito, a swarthy Spaniard LaCroix had brought over a century back. From the start, Nicholas and Benito never could tolerate the other, the Spaniard thinking Nicholas too weak and lacking of true spirit befitting a vampire while the other thought Benito was too reckless with his blood sport. Nicholas had witnessed atrocities he had not even seen LaCroix participate in, though the master vampire enjoyed watching the perversity of his rapidly developing protege. Right now, he had the geisha in a choke hold, the threat being that any further struggling would be punished with a snapped neck.

Without warning, the old priest leaped forward, shouting unintelligible words at LaCroix, waving his arthritic limps in a wild frenzy. LaCroix, instead, eyed the man like he was an annoying mosquito. "Really, is this the caliber of people you are associating with now, Nicholas? I know you have grown rather desperate, but this borders on nonsensical." With a vicious swat, the master vampire knocked the ancient man to the stone floor. Umeko screamed for her Great Uncle as a pool of dark blood formed around the old man's head.

Nicholas leaped forward to the priest's rescue, but bounced off an invisible wall. Shaking his head, he reached out before him and discovered a barrier of resistance; the more he pressed forward, the more he was held back. His eyes wide with confusion, he glanced at LaCroix who had a very curious look on his face.

"It appears you are trapped by means that not even I could explain... but it is indeed elegant. To think that this hideous old creature could manufacture something so... so extraordinary." He stepped forward and examined the vaporous but definitely impenetrable barrier. As he circled Nicholas' entrapment, he approached the inert body and nudged it with booted toe. "'Tis a pity he is dead, though. Now if I had brought him across, the fascinating secrets he could have taught me."

"Never!" shouted Akako as she launched herself from behind and outcropping of rock, making her presence known to the other vampires for the first time. Black sword drawn, she took a defiant step forward towards LaCroix. "Return to the night and away from hallowed ground, Kyuketsuki!"

"Hallowed ground?" LaCroix laughed at the strange spectacle before him -- a peasant woman wielding a sword almost her own height, poised to strike. "This is hardly Christian soil."

"It is sacred to my people! Take your minions and fly away before I split you wide open!"

"I must compliment you on your ability to provide such excellent entertainment, Nicholas," LaCroix smiled. "Benito, give the mortal to Janette to keep watch." With a quick gesture of the hand, he requested, "Amuse me."

The Spaniard, his eyes glowing gold from the Beast within, grinned malevolently as he squared off with his mortal opponent. He bared ivory fangs that gleamed in the beacons of light surrounding Nicholas' confinements. "Ah, Senora," he crooned as the two circled round, feeling out each other defenses, "you are too beautiful to have to crush your head between my bare hands." He then lunged forward but missed as she side-stepped him at the last possible second. He tumbled over his feet, slamming his body against the stone wall, but instantly rebounded into the air, flying straight at her, veering off sharply as he came into sword range.

LaCroix clapped in amusement as the two studied each other at a distance. From beyond the battle ring, the two other nameless vampires hooted and jeered, shouting out suggestions ranging from bestial rape to flaying alive and licking the blood from the exposed muscle below. Nicholas' head reeled as he wallowed in an excruciating sense of utter helplessness, watching Umeko held hostage, most likely for LaCroix's personal blood feast as was his practice to humiliate the reluctant vampire at every turn. And Akako -- foolhardy, courageous Akako...

The deadlock ended, the two opponents charging at each other except... the samurai leaping into the air, double-somersaulting and slamming her heel into his chin. The Spaniard howled in pain and frustration as he lashed out blindly, flailing arms to connect a bone-breaking blow to his foe. Crawling to his feet, Benito whipped his head around, growling in a rage when he could not find the young Japanese woman. He glanced at LaCroix, hawklike eyes almost beseeching the master vampire for direction.

Without warning, the female samurai appeared out of thin air behind the Spaniard, the gleaming black blade slicing through the air and through Benito's throat. A surprised groan issued from his lips as he teetered over, his head tumbling end over end on the cold stone floor.

The two nameless spectating vampires cried out a death howl and flew towards Akako like two Furies, clawing the air, reaching out to tear her to shreds. But the warrior woman stood her ground, waiting for them to come into reach before she performed the death dance once again, this time dispatching the duo with greater ease than Benito.

As two more bodies hit the floor, she then faced LaCroix, black blood dripping off the blade. "Give my sister back to me, or you all will die!" she growled threateningly.

Janette's eyes glittered with uncertainty as she found herself being scrutinized by the warrior. "LaCroix, give this... woman what she asks and let us leave."

The master vampire's eyes narrowed. "I find it interesting how a mere mortal could kill three of my better retainers... Janette, my love, bring the child over. You want your sister back, yes?"

Black, piercing eyes greeted his shimmering gold orbs. "I want my sister back alive and untouched."

"He'll kill her!" Nicholas warned. "He has no intention of letting her go alive!"

"I know," she replied stoically, her eyes never leaving LaCroix's.

"Poor little girl," the master vampire soothed in the hypnotic voice he used to mesmerize his victims. "Life is so short and so difficult. Your sister a prostitute for the lust of men, and yourself? An indentured servant whose life is meaningless unless it is for your master. I could be that master..."

Nicholas closed his eyes in despair. Akako was lost. No one could withstand the lure of LaCroix, not even him. And here he was, trapped in the contraption that was to free him from his blood lust, watching his friends being slaughtered...

"I do not have a hole in my mind," the warrior woman growled venomously as she took one step forward.

Now it was LaCroix's turn to look surprised. He retreated a few paces, staring at the samurai who would not succumb to the hypnotic stare no one else had ever escaped from. Nicholas almost crowed with triumph, for here was the first time he actually saw his mentor confused... and maybe a little bit scared.

"LaCroix..." Janette began hesitantly.

Without a word, the master vampire grabbed Umeko from the vampiress'





clutches and crushed the frightened geisha against his chest. "Nicholas was right. I had no intention of returning your sister back... as least not intact." He grabbed a handful of ebony hair and yanked her head to the side, exposing ivory white skin of her long neck.

"No!" Nicholas shouted from within his prison.

Akako took another step towards him, but LaCroix warned her off. "If you try, she'll die very horribly in front of you. Could you live with that?"

"I have to live with worse," she hissed, leaping forward.

LaCroix's laughter rang in their ears as he flew up and hovered twenty feet above their heads. "Unless you have wings, then you will just have to watch." With that, he sunk his teeth into the pulsating jugular vein.

"Nooo!!"

The scream was ripped from Nicholas' throat as he watched a woman he had trusted implicitly, who trusted him without reservation, initially fight against the creature at her throat, but soon her struggling diminished until she hung motionless in the air, suspended only by LaCroix's arms. When his blood lust was satisfied, he released his hold on the body that plummeted to the ground, crumpling like a wilted flower. Without a parting word, the master vampire flew out of the cavern, closing followed by a fleeing Janette.

Only then did Akako lower her sword and rushed to the side of her sister. Gentle fingers probed the flesh of her neck, only finding a vicious gash that was slowly oozing crimson. Realizing the inevitable had occurred, she crushed the body against her, rocking it back and forth, her face buried in the geisha's long, black hair.

Nicholas slumped to the ground, fists clenches in impotent rage towards himself, towards LaCroix.

LaCroix...

If Nicholas had known that just one event would have caused him so much misery, he would have allowed himself to fall in the field of battle during the Crusade than to have crossed over...

Toronto, 1993

Dr. Natalie Lambert yawned widely and lazily stretched her cramped limbs. "What I'd do for a good day's sleep," she murmured to herself, remembering the ruckus she woke up to when her next-door neighbors back at the apartments decided that it was time to have the cabinets redone, not even considering that there might be people with night jobs sleeping.

Next time, I'll crash at Nick's place, she smiled to herself. He'll be too dead to the world to even know or care that I'm there...

Her current project was to catch up with her backlog of work that Ms. Van Helsing, if she indeed was the murderer, had created for her. Unfortunately, viewing histology slides was too tedious for this time of the morning. The last time she tried, she almost blinded herself when she fell asleep at the microscope and barely caught herself as she teetered forward.

Coffee... That's what I need. A good, strong cup of coffee with enough sugar to give me diabetes... Or an interesting diversion to stimulate the ol' brain will do...

The phone chose to ring at that moment. Groaning, she wished that the person on the other end would not be informing her of another murder. I need another body to autopsy like I need another hole in my head! Goddamn it! I want to go home and sleep!

"Dr. Lambert! We need your help in women's holding!" issued an urgent voice over the speaker phone.

"What's going on?"

"Diedrae Kelly is out of control! She needs to be sedated!"

"I'm a pathologist, not a resident on call!" she protested. "Can't you get Dr. Wells to do it?"

"Dr. Wells is on sickleave, and whoever's covering for him won't answer our pages!"

"Oh, all right," she grumbled. "I'll be there in a few minutes." The line went dead, and Natalie hobbled over to the refrigerator, sorting through special stains, specimens, and, finally, a vial of Valium she had recently found when she was hunting for something else the other day. She reminisced the last time she had received a similar phone call; she almost got her jaw dislocated by a raving lunatic who was going into withdrawals. At least it's only a just serial killer this time...

* * * * *

"He's killing him! Let me go so I can stop it! Nooo!!"

"Good God, is that Kelly?" Natalie questioned in astonishment as more screams came from the isolated cell.

"She's been doing that for the last half hour," explained the female officer who escorted the physician down the corridors. "She woke up from a dead sleep carrying on just as you can hear her. You'd almost think she was still asleep."

By now, Natalie was in full view of the woman, struggling with two female guards. Drivels of perspiration plastered hair to her face, her precinct-issue garments soaking with sweat. But even from her advantage point, the pathologist could see that despite the odds being two-to-one, they were evenly matched. With a sudden burst of sheer energy, Kelly threw off the officers, hyperventilating and staring wildly at her captors.

Maybe this wouldn't be so easy after all, Natalie considered, stunned by the wild look in the woman's eyes, and... was she seeing things? For a moment, she could have sworn she saw an eerie blue glow within the suspect's gaze, but when Natalie blinked, it was gone.

I really must be tired, she contemplated as she fingered the syringe she held behind her. Donning on her negotiator's cap, she took a few steps forward. "Diedrae, what are you seeing?"

"It's too late," she whispered, eyes now glazed over. "He's finished the job."

"What job?" A few more steps closer.

"Whatever he does for whatever reason."

"He's killed someone?"

"Yes, and I wasn't there to stop him! Damn you all! I was getting so close to getting him!"

Natalie paused. "Where is he?"

"I don't know!" she howled in despair. "I can only feel what Kei is doing!"

"Kei?"

"The sword! The sword! Oh, Kei, why are you doing this to me?!"

Out flashed the hypodermic, and Natalie made a flying tackle at the woman, successfully pinning her down with enough time to stab the exposed upper arm and pump it up with the sedative. Rolling off, she scrambled to her feet and would have ran out the door of the cell, but when she turned around and glanced down at the woman, Kelly only lay there on the floor, motionless.

"That's strange," Natalie commented as she knelt down beside the woman. "Valium doesn't work that quickly. Diedrae! Can you hear me, Diedrae?" She gave the woman's shoulder a shake. Nothing.

The pathologist rose to her feet, worried but not too worried as the woman was still breathing. "Put her back in bed and I'll get the on-call physician's butt here, or I'm sending an officer out to drag him in!"

Once returning to her office, she quickly dialed Knight's desk, but no one answered. "Damn!" she swore as she dialed his home number.

"Hello, I'm either asleep or incommunicado..."

"Nick! If you're home, answer the damn phone!" She waited a few seconds. "Nick, something really strange happened here at the station. Diedrae Kelly suddenly went hysterical and claimed that the serial killer struck again. Now I know this sounds really weird, but for a moment, I thought I saw a bluish glow in her eyes like... like she was possessed. Now don't laugh, Nick, but I'm sure I saw what I saw--"

A rude buzz from the answering machine cut off any further message. Natalie glared at the phone in her hand, then began to dial the operator for the on-call physician.

* * * * *

"So what was so urgent that you dared to send a message to the station?"

Nick had never seen Janette so pale and agitated before. Even her hand shook as she raised the goblet filled with blood to her lips. "The Enforcers," she whispered. "Three have already been sighted here in the City. I have no idea how many more will converge."

Nick groaned as he put the bar to his back and faced the dance floor, already too crowded for most the clientele to really dance. "Great. Especially now that I'm having doubts we even have the real killer."

"If something isn't done soon to pacify the Enforcers, they may decide to pass judgment and not care if it's fair or not."

"Then what do you propose I do about it?" he inquired sarcastically. "Walk up to them and say it's all a terrible misunderstanding? That we can handle everything by ourselves? To tell the truth, I don't even know if any of the Code has been violated."

"Nicholas!"

When Nick saw the genuine worry in her eyes, he regretted the outburst. "I'm sorry, Janette," he murmured, taking her hand and holding it next to his cheek, fingers gently caressing the delicate skin of the inside of her wrist. "I didn't realize how much these murders have been upsetting you."

Her eyes glittered with the memory of a tragic past. "How many times have we fled from the hands of those who would exterminate us? Here we are, living in the twentieth century where these mortals consider themselves too modern to believe in ghosts and goblins, and I thought we could be safe..."

"To tell the truth, I've been having those nightmares, too," Nick confessed.

"What are we to do?"

Before Nick could answer, the bartender interrupted with a covert gesture of the head towards the cellar door. Janette excused herself and disappeared with her employee. Nick loitered for several minutes, amusing himself by watching the dancers gyrate on the highly polished dance floor. Glancing at his watch, he noted the early morning hour and quickly calculated less than an hour before sunrise. Wishing for an early night off, he sauntered towards the front entrance of The Raven and would have been out the door except Janette materialized at his side and grabbed his arm, jerking him back into the shadows.

"Nicholas! You must come with me!"

If Knight had thought Janette was nervous when he rendezvous with her twenty minutes ago, she was almost on the verge of panic now. "What's going

on?" he inquired, suddenly becoming very professional.

"It's Louis! He's... he's... Oh, you must see what has happened to him!"

She darted out the front entrance, then taking a quick turn into the alleyway. The duo ran a half business block before the Janette halted, creeping behind a rusty old dumpster that had been long abandoned. "Bertrand found him. Nicholas! You never captured the vampire killer!"

* * * * *

"Natalie, please, I need a very special favor from you, and it must all be off-the-record completely!" Nick's voice rang with urgency over the phone.

"What's this all about, Nick?" the pathologist yawned, not completely happy that she had been woken up.

"The vampire killer has struck again."

The news worked better than a cold shower or the strongest cup of coffee. Instantly, Natalie was awake and totally alert. "You mean Diedrae isn't a serial murderer?"

"You and I know it, but it'll be impossible to prove at the moment because the ninth victim was a vampire. Now you understand why we can't make this public at all?"

"Wait a minute. What can I do with a pile of dust and rotting clothes?"

"You've been watching too many horror movies," he chided. "He wasn't that old, for starters, so he won't be decaying that quickly. What I need from you is to determine if he was indeed killed by the same killer, or if this is just a copy-cat murder and our friend was incredibly unfortunate."

"Nobody kills a vampire without a struggle," Natalie pointed out.

"Not unless he's an inept one to begin with. Either Louis d'Armond was caught completely by surprise, or our killer can now tell the difference between mortal and the Undead. Either way, it's bad news all around. Janette, not to mention the rest of the vampire community here, are very disturbed by the sudden turn of events."

"I can only imagine. Where are you? It's almost dawn!"

"I'm at The Raven. You'd better get here on the double, because I dare not move the body till you've seen it."

"You haven't been home yet, have you?"

"No, why?"

"I left a message on your answering machine -- no, I'll tell you about it later. Can you hold on for fifteen minutes?"

"Barely. Just hurry, Nat -- and thanks."

* * * * *

It was definitely a first, Natalie thought as she surveyed the carnage before her, that she had ever been asked to determine the cause of death for a real, dead vampire. And the M.O. was the same, she'd stake her entire career on that, so it mattered little to take back samples to the lab where they might come into question. She glanced back at Nick and Janette, two heavily cloaked figures in the shadows of the buildings around them. Gazing up at the sky, she could see the deep blue sky begin to show streaks of fuschia and pink.

"You two better take cover," she advised as she rose to her feet.

"What's the verdict?" Nick inquired.

"It has to be the same person, I have no doubts about that," Natalie verified as she followed the duo back into The Raven.

"The body must be disposed," Janette reminded them.

Knight gazed beseechingly at Natalie. "You're the only one who can."

"Nick, I can't do that!" she laughed nervously. "How am I going to explain a dismembered corpse that's decaying faster than physics can explain?"

"The rooftop," Janette recommended. "Take him up to the rooftop and allow the sun to take him."

"And you better stand back; you've heard about spontaneous human combustion, haven't you?"

"You owe me one," she reminded him as she headed back for the alleyway, hoping she would find a big burlap sack on the way.

* * * * *

Back in the bowels of *The Raven's* basement, Natalie rejoined Nick who was pacing the floor next to Janette's very impressive wine collection. "It's done," she announced ruefully. "God, I'm glad you warned me, Nick. No sooner did I open up the bag than poof!! Up in smoke with hardly a trace! Sometimes I wish human bodies could be so easily disposed of. I would certainly be performing less autopsies."

"We are still left with a very big problem," he reminded her.

"I know. Both you, Janette, and I know that Diedrae couldn't have killed all those people, but there is no possible way we can prove it with this most recent murder... Shit! I almost forgot! Nick, I was called to Diedrae's cell earlier this morning... maybe around three o'clock, because she was completely hysterical. Kept shouting that somebody was killing somebody and she was trying to escape so that she could stop him. I managed to inject her with some Valium to calm her down, but she suddenly collapsed. I ended up putting her to bed and calling the on-call physician." She then clutched her head with her hands, straining her memory to recall all she had seen. "Damn, my brain just went on standby. When you get home, listen to your answering machine. I'm too exhausted to think anymore."

"By then, she'll be transferred to the provincial prison where it will be too late to help her at all."

"Nick, the evidence, as it stands, is circumstantial at best and very shaky. Unless the prosecutor can find better evidence to make a case, she might be dropped."

"But not after many months of court bureaucratic in-fighting. I feel bad enough as it is, knowing that I arrested an innocent woman whose career and family life are in a shambles. If I hadn't been so obsessed with preventing a repeat of history, I might had been a little more objective..."

"Nick, she hasn't been the first person accidentally arrested, nor will she be the last. My bet is that this fiend will strike again, the victim being human, this time, and then she'll be freed in light of these new events."

"Until then, we all will have to wait." He slumped against one of the wine racks. "I wish there was a way I could convince Stonetree--"

"Nicholas," Janette warned sternly, appearing from the shadows. "You cannot say anything about it. I will not protect you if you do."

Natalie glanced at Nick, then Janette, unable to fathom the contest of wills that was occurring between the two vampires. Attributing it to something that mere mortals were not privileged to know, she shrugged her shoulders. "Both of you need some sleep. I'll see you tonight, Nick -- and don't forget to check your answering machine when you get home!"

* * * * *

"Diedrae Kelly is where?"

"In the hospital. She apparently had some sort of attack while in

isolation, and Dr. Farnum had her transferred over there -- under tight security. I can only imagine what kind of care she'll be getting over there. Hard to be objective with a serial killer," Schanke reported.

"Which I'm having my doubts about," Nick mumbled.

"Huh? What more proof do you need? We have the fingerprints and witnesses, and she had no alibi except for this crazy story about a madman and a stolen sword!"

"There's still a lot of room for reasonable doubt, Schanke," he snapped short-temperedly as he scooted his chair back.

"Where are we going?"

"We?"

"Yeah, we're partners, aren't we? We're working on the same case, aren't we?"

A pang of guilt struck Nick as he realized that he had been isolating Schanke from vital information -- information he knew his partner could never know. "Yeah, we're going to the hospital to ask Diedrae a few questions -- like why she went berserk last night. Let me tell you what Natalie told me this morning..."

* * * * *

They found Diedrae sitting up in bed, fussing with the IV site on the dorsum of her left hand. When she spied visitors, what was a smile eager for company became an inhospitable frown when she recognized the faces. "Oh, it's you again."

"I just wanted to be sure you were all right. You gave Dr. Lambert a scare last night."

"Dr. Lambert? The 'Our Lady of the Sacred Hypodermic Needle'? Dr. Farnum told me I had a bad reaction to the Valium that bitch gave me. Why the hell did she do that to me?"

"She said you were having a fit of hysterics."

"That wasn't a fit of hysterics... More like a really bad dream."

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

"It was just a stupid dream. There's really nothing to say about it. I'm sure you've had bad dreams that you don't mention to other people."

She had him there. Schanke gave him a weird look regarding the current line of questioning but said nothing.

"Dr. Lambert mentioned that you were saying that somebody was killing someone -- with a sword."

The woman paled noticeably. "I... I might have... It was a terrible dream..."

"Do your dreams come true?"

"Nick, what are you up to--"

But Knight adamantly waved his partner silent. "Well?"

The woman was quiet for a long time, as if she were weighing the pros and cons of what she might say next. "Has there been another murder?" she whispered hoarsely.

He nodded solemnly.

"Another murder!" Schanke exclaimed, becoming very annoyed. "Why didn't you--"

"Schanke!" Knight turned around and glared at the homicide detective. "Don't you remember Captain Stonetree's order? We weren't supposed to mention the ninth killing because everyone thinks we have the real killer behind bars!" Nick then gave him a covert wink.

"Oh, I forgot," he replied lamely.

Fury brewed in her eyes. "I told you I didn't kill them!" she fumed.

"Now I believe you. You must understand, the circumstantial evidence against you was quite convincing. I'm truly sorry for all the suffering you must have gone through." He hoped he was coming across as sincere as he felt.

"So, when can I go free?"

"Well, it isn't as easy as that... yet. You see, you're still very much guilty in the eyes of the public. If we were to let you go now, I'm afraid someone who felt that your release was a travesty of injustice might just take a few potshots at you in vigilante spirit -- not that we get much of that sort of thing here in Canada, but the public sentiment towards you is hardly friendly. Until we capture the real criminal, I want to keep you here in protective custody -- so that you won't find yourself a victim of public outcry and also will give the true killer a sense of false security."

She slumped back in the hospital bed. "At this point, I really don't have much of a choice, do I?"

"No, not much. What I want to do now is to collectively discover who this serial murderer is. What I don't understand is how you managed to track him down with little else than news reports. You're not even sure what he looks like. And I still can't understand why you're so convinced the thief of your sword is a man to begin with."

"Well, maybe I can tell you more, now that you know I didn't kill anyone."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Schanke purred.

Her fingers fidgeted with the clear plastic IV tubing. "Very few people knew I was in possession of Kei, that's the sword's name. It was forged back in the fourteen hundreds by a method that is still lost to us today. A sword of such a secret formula by the ancient masters is highly sought but seldom found. An interesting note about Kei is that the blade isn't the usual bright, shiny steel one equates with swords. On the contrary, its blade was the color of very dark pewter, but don't let that make you underestimate its strength. Part of my life has been spent on saber and fencing, and I've never encountered such an incredible sword in my entire life."

The gnawing sense of *deja vu* within Nick was now overwhelming. "How did you come across this sword?"

She paused again. "I was initiated in an old martial arts sect back around 1980 where I was a student of a venerable master. He taught me much about mastering the mind and the sword. After the 1984 Olympics, he gave me Kei, saying that I had earned the right to become its master. As is common custom in this sect, I was ritualistically bonded to the sword -- you'd probably think it's a lot of hocus pocus, but this is serious business. It was during the ritual I... I'm not sure how to describe it other than I felt as if I had become possessed by the sword's previous masters whose spirits, upon death, have coalesced with Kei's own personality, and I saw and heard all from the very birth of this great sword."

"This is crazy," Nick heard Schanke mutter under his breath.

This comment did not go unnoticed by the woman. "You wanted to know the truth," she snapped. "If you're not ready to hear it, then you can get the hell out of here right now!"

"I'm sorry," he shot back defensively, "but I think you're getting your reality and your science fiction/fantasies mixed up. There's no such thing as possessed swords. It's just a figment of your fertile imagination -- which is great, but I can't accept this."

"Schanke, why don't I finish this up on my own?" Nick suggested tactfully. "Perhaps I can figure out a way to help you get that furniture requisition detail put through?"

Schanke knew a bribe when he heard one. Disgruntled, he accepted anyway

and disappeared out of the room.

"For a person who likes to read my books, he's incredibly narrow-minded," Diedrae commented sourly.

"Tell me more about Kei," Knight urged.

"The reason why I know the thief is male is that Kei is a cursed sword. 'No man shall master me!' is its trademark. The irony is that only a woman can wield it. Kei was originally made for the daughter of a loyal retainer who was beset by jealous factions and rivals for the then Emperor's favor. Knowing that he could be assassinated or be framed and be forced to perform *seppuku* at any moment, he commissioned the sword to be made for his daughter to be used to protect herself. This retainer also request an ingenious curse to be woven in the manufacturing of the sword to prevent it from being confiscated by enemies. Only a woman could be bonded to the sword. If the sword falls into the hands of a man, he will be slowly twisted into insanity. That's why I know the thief of Kei is male."

She wearily massaged her temples. "The only thing I didn't count on is that as I am still bonded to the sword, I can sense whenever it's used by him. Worse yet, I'm finding myself being sucked down into his mental hell-on-earth every time he murders someone, and... and I don't know how much more I can handle. Maybe Ms. Landstrand was correct -- perhaps I do need counseling, but where does one find a counselor specializing in the paranormal?"

Wordlessly, Nick shrugged his shoulders.

Diedrae gave him a puzzled look. "You do believe me," she stated matter-of-factly. "You're a police officer with the prerequisite logical brain and deductive reasoning. I've just told you a completely outlandish story, and you believe me."

"It's the most reasonable explanation for this case," Knight revealed.

"How come I have this feeling you know something more about this sword that I haven't told you?"

"The same way I knew you weren't telling the whole truth when we first took you into custody."

"But how can you know? That sword had been dormant for over fifty years before I came into possession of it."

Nick smiled enigmatically, knowing it would serve only to frustrate her. "Let's just say I had an encounter with it in a previous lifetime."

* * * * *

"You want to take Kelly into your personal custody?" Stonetree questioned incredulously.

"I've managed to obtain some information from an anonymous source that would suggest that Kelly isn't the murderer at all."

"But the evidence--"

"Dr. Lambert's report there states that there are clothing and carpeting threads that do not match anything in Kelly's possession which can only be linked to the true murderer. The blood on the swords in Kelly's possession do not match that of any of the victims; in fact, the blood is Kelly's own."

The captain's face twisted in distaste. "Even if she isn't the murderer, she's still a candidate for a psychiatric evaluation. Sounds like some sick masochistic behavior to me."

"Nonetheless, I need her as bait, so to speak. If we can draw out the murderer to attack her, then we could catch him red-handed."

"You're absolutely convinced Kelly isn't the serial killer?"

"Positive. We're now looking for a madman who believes that Kelly's sword has invested him with superpowers to help him rid the world from evil. She had

received anonymous threats prior to the sword's disappearance, and she's been tracking him down via a path of violent deaths ever since."

Stonetree sipped contemplatively from his coffee cup. "There have been times that I thought you were really out in left-field, Knight, but you've always caught the culprit. Based on your prior successes, I'll give you plenty of leniency on this case, but you better make my putting my neck out on the line worth it. If you screw up, I'll make sure you take the brunt of the heat."

"Agreed!" Nick replied, probably a bit too hastily when he thought about it later. "Uh, there is one sticky point, however," he then mentioned. "Kelly said she won't cooperate if Schanke's involved. Apparently, the two didn't hit it off well, and first impressions do die hard."

"Don't worry. I'll get him assigned to the Worthington case. And unexpected death, leaving the young swinging widow filthy rich with everyone else left in the cold pointing fingers and making all kinds of accusations. Lots of seedy gossip -- something Schanke can really sink his teeth into."

"I'm sure he will. Thanks, Captain." Then adopting his most subtle hypnotic voice, he then said, "Oh yes, there's also a little problem regarding a requisition form and a Lazy Boy recliner..."

* * * * *

Diedrae Kelly surveyed the abandoned top floor of the building that housed *The Raven* downstairs. "Hardly the Waldorf-Astoria, but I've done worse," she muttered.

"That I am certain of," Janette responded icily, her arms crossed tightly across her chest.

"But what makes you think he'll come back to this section of town?" Kelly questioned Nick. "He never returns to the same area twice for a murder."

"Due to the unusual specificities of the ninth murder, my hunch is that he will return to this very site for more mayhem."

"Over his dead body," he overheard Janette hiss under her breath.

"Maybe," he grinned back at her.

"Thanks, anyway, for letting me stay here," Diedrae mentioned to the owner of *The Raven*. "I won't be a bother."

"There is food in the refrigerator over there," Janette pointed out, ignoring the woman's previous statement. "The bathroom is in the adjoining room over there, complete with a bathtub of ancient vintage. There is no phone, but Detective Knight should be remediying that problem via the police department. If you should require something, ask Detective Knight. I will be quite busy running the night club downstairs to be of much help."

"Whatever," the woman commented, appearing unperturbed by Janette's ill-mannered speech.

"May I have a word with you, Detective Knight?" Janette growled in his direction.

"You could be a little more civilized than that," Nick admonished when the two reached the bottom of the stairwell that led into the kitchen entrance of *The Raven*.

"You could have taken her someplace else rather than here!" she snapped. "I don't want her here! With the Enforcers roaming about, she'll incriminate me!"

"Diedrae didn't kill Louis!" Nick sternly reminded her.

"You may think so, but I don't trust her one bit! She doesn't even smell much like a mere mortal!"

"We are here to catch the Van Helsing serial killer. Once he's been taken care of, the Enforcers will be satisfied and will leave us alone again. Isn't

that what you wanted me to do in the first place, Janette?"

"Now that one of our own has fallen victim to that sword, we are not at all safe! Once the Enforcers hear of Louis' murder, they will scatter us to the winds like they did in the Carpathians long ago. All because of a foolish mortal hell-bent on a novel of misinformation."

"The past is passed; there's nothing you can do about it now. As for Diedrae, I advise that you treat her with a little more respect. Remember way back to 1885 in Japan?"

It was a few moments before the woman recollected the significant event. "I do not understand the connection with the geisha. Anyway, it was all LaCroix's idea to sabotage your little experiment in regaining your mortality."

"You recall the sword that effortlessly cut down Benito and the other two cutthroats of LaCroix's? That sword belongs to Diedrae now."

Janette froze in her tracks and whirled around, confronting Nick. "That is it! I want both of you out of here! How dare you bring her under my roof!"

"The woman you fear has been dead almost a hundred years ago."

"I saw what that sword can do! It kills vampires as quickly and deadly as it killed Louis! It's already tasted vampire blood; what makes you think it will stop thirsting for it?"

"We have no choice. We must find the killer before he strikes down the next victim -- mortal or vampire!"

* * * * *

Day came and went, and despite Nick's worries of having to think of a brilliant lie to explain why he avoided the sunlight, Diedrae slept straight through the entire day as if it was perfectly normal for her to do so. Only when the sun dipped below the horizon did she stir.

"You must be a creature of the night," Nick chuckled as he watched her consume a frugal meal of bread, cheese, and an apple.

"He does most of his dirty work at night now," she mumbled as she ate. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Already ate," he replied, which was the truth. Janette's bartender, before *The Raven* opened for business that night, had hand-delivered a chilled bottle of bovine blood, courtesy of the Mistress, and Nick was touched at her generosity despite the fact he knew she was furious with him.

"Your friend downstairs doesn't like she much, does she?"

"She is upset with the death of a mutual friend of ours." Well, Louis was not exactly a friend of Nick's, rather, the truly dead Undead was a familiar face as he frequently patronized *The Raven*. Mostly harmless, as most vampires went.

"No, I think it goes beyond that."

Nick thought back to that fatal night in the cavern deep in the heart of the mountain. Janette then must had been more frightened of Akako the samurai than he had assumed. Perhaps she did feel more guilty of the consequences of that night, and now she feared a retaliation from the past in the form of a sword that could easily kill vampires. If anything that Diedrae said about that cursed Japanese blade was true, may the vampiress did have something to worry about.

"How did you sleep?" he inquired, quickly changing the subject.

"Poorly, maybe even more so."

"But you slept all day."

"I may be comatose, but my dreams are... are too disturbing now. It's almost like I'm in his head, and it's a complete shambles." She shook her head as if to clear it of cobwebs. "So, how do we capture your serial killer while

just sitting in this abandoned fourth floor?"

"Well, for starters, though you are actually in my custody, the story is that you escaped the hospital last night and is at large at this very moment."

"What? Not only does everyone think I'm your Ms. Van Helsing, I'm now a fugitive? What's going to keep anyone from taking potshots at me?"

"For starters, we have very strict gun control laws here. Toronto isn't Chicago or Detroit."

"I don't find much consolation in that. So far, this city has been successfully terrorized by a madman and a sword which has been responsible for nine deaths."

"Touche."

"So what's the plan?"

"You stated that this thief never strikes the same location twice, however, you also said that he's now being rather sloppy with his work."

She nodded.

"We'll be providing him an incentive of strike here once again. Now that word is out that you're on the loose, he'd be more likely to try again and incriminate you."

"So what's my line?"

"Yell, 'Vampire!'"?

She stared at him, a tiny smile curling her lips. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Think about it. He has ritualistically killed his nine victims as if they were vampires. Because he believes that *they were!* So we planted a story in a local gossip rag regarding a woman who reported that she was attacked by a vampire in this area. What better way to attract a vampire killer than to provide him with a mission?"

"It just might work, seeing how obsessed he is about exterminating the Undead. When do we start?"

* * * * *

"I feel like a hooker," she muttered as she hugged her arms tighter across her chest. She then glanced at her protector. "You look ridiculous!" she criticized but with a smirk. "Do modern-day vampires still wear black capes?"

"Not really, but *he* doesn't have to know. The point is to provide instant recognition of an archetypal symbol so that instinct will take over."

"Is this the extent that Toronto police will go to catch their man?"

"Shh!! Someone's coming!"

That someone coming was a mortal patron of *The Raven* that Nick recognized. Pulling Diedrae back into the shadows, they froze until the slightly drunk man stumbled by. The woman expelled a nervous breath and shuddered again, and Nick draped the theatrical cloak about her. "Cold?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I suppose it's the wind off the Lake, isn't it?"

But he knew it was otherwise but admired her sense of courage. "If this becomes too much for you, let me know. We could take a break--"

She shook her head adamantly. "I want this bastard caught so that I can live with my sanity once again."

* * * * *

Two hours passed, and despite Nick's strong intuition that tonight would be the night, he found himself fidgeting more. The idea was ludicrous, he was now thinking. How could he even assume that this mysterious serial killer would make his move this night, in this end of town? Did he even realized that he had

managed to kill one of the Undead? Would he make the connection between Toronto's impressive vampire population and *The Raven*? If Janette knew what he was doing, she would flay him alive.

By now, Diedrae had unexpectedly dozed off, and Nick let her sleep as he could detect nothing with his acute vampiric hearing. The unexpected warm front had brought in plenty of humidity, but now that the night temperature had dropped precipitously, a thick mist settled down on the City, not as thick as London in Nick's past, but pleasantly reminiscent. He drew a deep breath, allowing the cool air to bathe his lungs, bringing back old memories from his seemingly endless supply...

Then Diedrae woke up with a start.

Right away, Nick knew that something was definitely different about the woman. No longer was she the strung-out woman clinging to whatever threads of sanity she had left. Her body tensed with anticipation, her heart rate jumped up to a higher speed... and her eyes... Now he partially understood what a sleepy Natalie had tried to tell him on his answering machine. Like a night owl, she peered through the night fog with a new alertness that belied her previous fatigue. And that glow that could only be seen from the corner of his eye... Could it as Natalie had suspected... possession?

"He's coming," she whispered. "I can feel him. You were right!"

"Are you ready? You remember what you need to do?"

"Run into the alley, look helpless, and scream and yell that I'm being attacked by a vampire. Are you ready for him? He won't be an easy man to bring down."

"Don't worry. I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

"You better..." Her voice trailed off.

Only now did Nick sense the presence of another individual off in the mist -- quiet but crisp heel striking the damp pavement. Probably one hundred eighty pounds, he reckoned. If this man was in any way associated with this oriental sword cult Diedrae had belonged to, he would hardly be out of shape. And remembering how lethal that sword had been over one hundred years ago, Nick had to reinforce in his brain that he could not be overconfident with the usual sense of vampiric omnipotence. This man might not be in tune with the legendary accursed sword, but he still was deadly.

Without warning, Diedrae wrenched herself from the shelter of Nick's warm cloak and scrambled willy-nilly down the alleyway, personifying a woman terrified and tired of running for her life. With the finesse of an actress, she stumbled into open, illuminated by a sole light post. "Oh please, oh please!" she gasped between labored breaths as she collided with the ornamental lamp post, her quarry only ten feet away. "Please! Call the police! Oh, God, please help me!"

The features of the shadowy figure sharpened to reveal a man in a black trench coat and a dapper felt hat that hid his features. Well-cut, black leather gloves sheathed large hands that reached out to lend her support. But when he touched her upper arm, fingers clamped down, biting deep into her skin. She uttered a painful squeak.

"Please, sir! Please help me! We have to get out of here, or we'll both be dead!" She whirled her head around in panic -- Nick was not quite sure it was feinted or genuine.

"Ah, Diedrae," rumbled a deep voice that spurred a glint of recognition on the woman's face. "The eternal actress. I've been looking for you for quite some time now. Why don't we go find some privacy so that we can talk, hmm?"

Shit! Nick mentally cursed, realizing how transparent his ruse had been. So transparent that he had sent Diedrae into a worse danger than he was willing to risk. He watched the shadowy figure commandeer the woman down the alleyway,

directly past the vampire. As the two approached the stairwell in the back of *The Raven*, she twisted futilely in an attempt to escape, but this earned her a stinging swat across the face as he dragged her into the stairsteps.

As he was about to levitate upwards, hoping to catch a glimpse on which floor the duo would stop on, Janette magically appeared at his side. "Nick! You and that woman must leave immediately! Three Enforcers just entered *The Raven*! They are looking for you!"

Nick groaned inwardly, not believing his ill luck. "I have other problems I must deal with," he heard himself saying as he launched himself upward in the air, hovering from window to window, searching for any sign of Diedrae.

"Nicholas!" he heard hissed in his ear. Glancing to his side, he found Janette levitating next to him. "If you do not cooperate..."

"Listen to me!" he growled menacingly. "We have the killer, but he's holding Diedrae hostage! If you want to tag along, fine; then help me find where those two are!"

"All right, but once this is over, you promise you will never use my building as a safe house again! I can lose a lot of business."

"Promise!"

The two split up, and Nick found an open window to crawl through. Landing with the grace and silence of a cat, he prowled the abandoned corridors of the floors above *The Raven* that Janette had yet to utilize. Before him, he could hear two voices exchanging heated words.

"...I was to have the sword! I had been Te's protege ever since I was five years old! He promised me Kei, but then you came along and in a matter of a few years, you usurped my position as Te's student."

"Te never promised you Kei, came Diedrae's voice. "If you knew anything about Kei, you would know why Te never offered it to you. He couldn't have given you Kei because it is a killer!"

"Yes, I know. A very powerful dealer of death, as I can tell. Kei is wasted on you; you have no idea of its potential."

"I know its potential, and I can see what it's doing to you, Branton. It's eating you from the inside-out, and in a matter of time, you will be a husk of a human and very dead."

The man laughed. "Dead? Do I look dead? Hardly. In fact, I'm more alive now than I have ever felt in my entire life! In killing all these vampires, Kei allows me to absorb their power over humans so that soon, I'll be invincible."

"Vampires? What vampires?"

"They're all over the place! Last night's killing was indeed spectacular because you could see him decay before your eyes, except not so quickly."

"I thought you were just crazy; now I see you're hopeless. You have completely gone against all Te's teachings. If he were still alive, he would not only have disowned you, but would have eliminated an unnecessary evil."

Another resounding slap. "You were always the uppity bitch who's always needed a cuttin' down. And now's my chance to give you an excellent education."

"If you think you're trying to frighten me, you're not."

"Then you will learn to do so very quickly--"

Now Nick could see the two. The six-foot-four man, ash blond hair with a hint of grey at the temples, was struggling with Diedrae when she successfully broke his choke hold and scampered to the other side of what used to be a business work area, segregated by cubicle dividers. Placing as many desks between him and her, she panted, trying to catch her breath. "Don't make me do this," she warned. "Don't make me hurt you."

"You? Hurt me? You don't have Kei anymore; I do. Kei will do what I wish it to do. And right now, I desire to cut off your arm at the shoulder so I can see you bleed most prettily. You know the effect blood has on vampires, don't

you? Very similar to a shark feeding frenzy. I killed a vampire here, and I know there are plenty more around here."

At this moment, Janette crept up behind Nick, obviously having heard the last comment. "By the moon, he knows about us, Nicholas! He must be eliminated!"

Branton halted his tirade and whipped his head around. "Who followed you?!"

Her eyes narrowed. "Friends of mine. Vampire friends!"

Janette's eyes fluttered wide open. "You told her, Nicholas!"

"I told her nothing! She could be bluffing him to force him to make a rash move!"

Branton's eyes went wide with a horrible realization. "You must be a vampire, too! That's why you have eluded me so well!"

Diedrae rolled her eyes towards the disassembling ceiling. "Nick! Will you give me a hand with this fool?"

On cue, Knight stood up and whipped out his badge. "Don't even think of moving, Branton. You're under arrest."

Cursing under his breath, the crazed man jumped back and unsheathed a long, black-bladed Japanese sword from within the trenchcoat, holding it high above his head in a stance of aggression. "Don't move! Kei won't like it if you try to hurt me!"

"Give me Kei, Branton!"

"No! Kei now belongs to me! You will not take away my inheritance!"

"An inheritance that has led you to kill nine people?"

"They were vampires! They deserve it!"

"The sword's twisting your mind. You must give me Kei if you want to save your soul, Branton."

"They killed my sister and my uncle! I'll never forgive them for that!"

"You don't even have a sister, Branton! Think! This is all a figment of your imagination!"

With a howl, he lunged forward, the sweeping blade barely missing her left ear as she dodged out of its way. "Kei won't surrender to me all its strength until you are dead! Don't make it hard on yourself, Diedrae!"

The woman skirted around a divider, distracting him long enough for Nick to jump the man from behind. However, the raw adrenalin pumping through the madman's veins gave him superhuman power which surprised even the detective. Twisting from Knight's grip, Branton drew back and thrust the sword deep into Nick's abdomen and withdrew, staring at the pale blood on the black blade.

The vampire, eyes blazing yellow, howled in pain, stunned that the bite of the cursed sword was like fire in his entrails, not at all what he had experienced in the past. Stumbling back, he fell over an overturned chair and crashed backwards.

"Nicholas!" Janette shrieked as she rushed to his rescue.

Branton guffawed like a maniac and would have given the vampiress a taste of Knight's agony, but she outwitted him by scooping up the detective and flying well out of range.

Nick cringed in agony as he was suddenly reminded of how pain really felt. "Get the Enforcers! Only they can stop him!" he hissed through gritted teeth.

"I won't leave you here to this fiend!"

"Get the Enforcers or more will be killed! I will not lose any more of my friends to that sword!"

Biting her lip so hard that a single drop of blood formed on her mouth, she kissed him passionately before disappearing on the wind.

"Are you quite finished with this nonsense?" Diedrae announced critically. Nick glanced up and found her perched on top of the office cubicle divider.





"I'm not through with anyone, bitch!" Branton shouted, waving the sword at her.

"You have one last chance, Branton. Hand over the sword, and I and Kei will be merciful to you. Otherwise..."

He did not even give her time to finish. Running pell-mell towards her, sword held high over his head for a fatal swipe downward, Branton charged.

"Get out of here!" Nick yelled. "Reinforcement's coming."

But Diedrae only dropped down to the ground and waited for the inevitable.

Eyes wide with anticipated victory, Branton howled with glory as the blade flashed down... and was stopped as Kelly clapped her palms on either side of the sword. Angered by the disarming gesture, he retreated back, staring at her in disbelief.

"Kei," she spoke softly, "return to your mistress, your rightful place. Leave his soul to be consumed by his own failure. You deserve far more than what he can ever provide..."

Nick watched, mesmerized, as Branton's face twisted into an ugly mask. A strangled cry was torn from his throat as, if commanded by a power beyond his ability to withstand, he threw up the sword towards Diedrae who neatly caught it. The woman inhaled deeply, as if suddenly healed from a wasting disease, as her fingers flexed with almost a luxurious laziness around the pommel. Then, she fixed her gaze on the now cowering man.

"You would never know the power or the awesome responsibility of being Kei's keeper. You have committed crimes against your fellow human for the mere advancement of your own selfish pride. Therefore, you must atone for your misdeeds. Go!"

"No!" he begged as he inched towards the window by a power that manipulated his body as if it were a puppet. "Have mercy, please! Diedrae! Don't--"

"You have broken the Code," she intoned. "You must do what must be done!"

Weeping bitterly, he was now at the edge of the window. "Don't make me do this!"

"I'm not making you do anything! You broke the oath you took when you were initiated, now the Death Oath is now being invoked. I don't have to do anything now."

The window latch was now released, and he cried out in horror as he watched his body condemn him to death as he stepped out onto the window ledge. "Make it stop! I don't want to die!"

"Then you should have thought of that before you began your tour of terror. Do your duty!"

"You can't do this, Diedrae!" Nick called out. "You can't take justice into your own hands!"

The woman only shook her head sadly as she watched the man, now teetering dangerously on the ledge, sob as he then leaped off. She did not even cringe as both heard a sickening thud on the cement pavement outside.

Sighing with resolution, she then returned to Nick's side, examining the stab wound that, to any other person, would have been fatal, but now she watched the edges slowly approximate and begin the healing process right before her eyes. With a smile that announced new-found understanding, she held out a hand for his. "I hope you're feeling better."

Nick was numb, not by just what he had witnessed, but the fact that she knew exactly what he was. "I am," he replied rather lamely as he grasped her hand and she helped him to his feet. "How did you--"

"You forgot. The sword absorbs the past lives of its mistresses, passing that one's knowledge to the next -- rather like racial memory. Apart from Kei, my mind was a muddled mess because proximity is important to the bond between us. Upon regaining Kei, I remembered when I last saw you. That was some time

ago, wasn't it?"

"Akako cursed me for the deaths of her sister and great uncle. She wouldn't even let me explain..."

"She would have never forgiven you. Umeko and the Great Ancient were the only family she had. There is one thing I would like to know -- would the Great Ancient's spell have worked?"

"If we had remained uninterrupted, I would have thought so. I remember now warm I felt..." His voice trailed off, his mind a long, long ways away.

Diedrae left him to his reminiscing as she grasped the sword with both hands, executing a complex, ritualistic exercise that was amazingly swift and agile that only Nick's acute sight could even see past the blur. Then suddenly, the sword stopped in mid-swope, held in an offensive position. One, two, three stabs forward, then back into a defensive pose... and the woman froze.

The door crashed open, admitting three imposing figures in vintage clothing spanning two centuries. Grizzled teeth and flaming yellow eyes greeted both vampire and warrior woman, as the three Enforcers planted themselves between the two and the exit. Nick's blood drained from his face as his eyes alighted on the true-death-giving stake held by the eldest-appearing of the Enforcers.

THE CODE THAT PROTECTS US HAS BEEN BROKEN! boomed a chilling voice in Nick's skull. **PREPARE TO ACCEPT YOUR PUNISHMENT!**

"There she is!" Janette's voice accused from behind the three. "She's the one responsible for all the deaths!"

"No, she is not!" Nick defended. "The real killer is out on the sidewalk dead! It is all over, and this woman shall forget all about it."

The eldest Enforcer fixed his forbidding gaze on the woman who remained rigid, sword held ready for a swift attack. Agonizingly slow moments passed, and she hardly even flinched under the penetrating eyes. **SHE CANNOT BE CONTROLLED.**

"Of course, I can't!" she countered, her body tense as a spring ready to fire. "I don't have a hole in my mind! If you dare touch either of us, you won't live to regret it."

In his several-centuries' length of life as one of the Undead, Nick had never seen an Enforcer smile; this one almost did at the seemingly ridiculous and foolish words spoken by a mere female mortal. **. THEN YOU BOTH SHALL BE ELIMINATED.**

"Take one more step forward, and you'll feel what this blade can do," she threatened, placing herself between the Enforcers and Nick.

The eldest Enforcer did, and she lunged forward. He leaped up into the air, arms extended to grab her neck and deliver a bone-breaking twist, but she rolled out of the way, positioning her sword upward, stabbing him in the side as he came down to the ground. Howling in pain and surprise, he turned on the woman, ugly ivory fangs bared, as he rushed forward with lightning speed that no mortal could evade. Diedrae, on the other hand, raced forward, piercing his chest. Nick flinched at the cries of rage and suffering as he felt his own wound, though almost healed, throbbing with such a squeezing ache.

The other two Enforcers joined in the fury, but they all halted the assault when the black blade slashed through the air, and the head of the eldest Enforcer toppled over to the ground. Janette gasped in utter shock for never in known history had a mortal withstood combat with not just one, but three Enforcers, and had managed to dispatch one. Nick could only stare, not believing that Diedrae had done what she had just done. **This has to be a dream. Even LaCroix would have had never confronted an Enforcer. No wonder he was scared...**

Then the tables turned. With a wild cry that even sent shivers up Nick's spine, Diedrae made a mad dash towards the remaining two, effectively scattering them out of the room, and she rushed out the door, sword dripping with the

Enforcer's pale blood.

"Don't go after her!" Janette warned, pulling Nick aside before he could chase after the female berserker.

"She's crazy! There is no possible way she can survive this frontal attack. The other Enforcers will come... Janette, it's not her fault!"

"You saw her attack the Enforcers, Nicholas! She even killed one! Oh, blessed moon, we are all doomed! Once she is executed, they'll come after us as they will think we were her accomplices. Nicholas, you must save your own life! Hers is already forfeited. There is nothing you can do for her now or ever!"

That was one of Nick's hardest choices to make, to abandon someone who saved his life to certain death. His acute vampiric ears soon picked up the Enforcers' call for reinforcements, and he knew she did not have much longer to live.

* * * * *

"Hello? Nick? Are you still here with us?" Natalie coaxed the brooding vampire.

"Yes, I am," he reported blandly as he absent-mindedly dangled his legs over the edge of the empty stainless steel autopsy table.

"I said, the clothing and hair fragments of Mr. Branton Davis is an exact match of those samples found at seven of the eight murder scenes. We also managed to pick of fingerprints belonging to him, too. How's Stonetree taking all of this?"

"He's upset that we didn't take him alive, which isn't surprising," Knight reported. "However, he didn't appreciate the fact that Diedrae Kelly got away. He still had some questions to ask."

Natalie saw that any conversation regarding Kelly was definitely a sore spot with Nick. "Tell me about that sword. Your description was quite intriguing. And while we're on the subject, why don't you finish that story you started telling me... oh, it seemed so long ago."

For the first time since Nick had visited the morgue, he smiled, but it was a bittersweet one.

Epilogue

Toronto, 1994

As nights went, this particular one was an exceptionally difficult one.

First, while attempting to apprehend a drug dealer responsible for eleven deaths due to overdose secondary to ultra-pure cocaine, Schanke was shot in the shoulder -- nothing too serious, but the free-flowing blood nearly drove Nick blood-crazy that he had to temporarily leave his partner in order to gain control over the overwhelming blood cravings. This action had been misinterpreted as frank abandonment by Schanke and right now, he wasn't talking to Nick.

Second, the suspect got away with more than two hundred thousand dollars worth of pharmaceutical cocaine, ruining a bust Knight had been planning for weeks.

Third, Stonetree had given him an earful about losing more than ten thousand dollars of department petty cash for purposes of staging the drug deal. Now he was threatening to take it out of Knight's paycheck.

When Nick opened the refrigerator door, he suddenly realized how hungry he was. Grabbing a full bottle of porcine blood, he returned to the living room and flopped himself on the couch, too mentally drained to sense that someone

else was also present.

"Good evening, Detective Knight."

Nick almost dropped the wine bottle as he whirled around at the sound of the unexpected voice that had spoken directly into his ear. Stormy grey eyes met his own, and they twinkled with mischief... but there was something more down in their depths that Nick's tired mind could not quite comprehend.

"Diedrae Kelly?!" he exclaimed, now completely confused by her presence. "I don't understand. The last time I saw you, you were..." Then he realized the terrible truth.

"Just wanted to stop on by to let you know I'm back in town -- to stay."

Nick's hand shot out, grabbing hers, feeling the texture of her silk-smooth skin... and the unusually low body temperature... "How... how did this... The last time I saw you, you were pursuing the Enforcers, and--"

DOES THIS ANSWER YOUR QUESTION?

Nick's head reeled at the force of the telepathic message, and he only stared at the woman -- the only person he had ever met that dared to take on the Enforcers. "You're one of them, but how?"

She strolled from behind the couch to a chair to the side and eased herself down gracefully. "I would have to say that it was a strange twist of events, Detective Knight. After reinforcements were called, I didn't stand a chance, however..." She paused for a moment. "Since I had eliminated one of their number, they thought it best to attempt to recruit me rather than destroy me, that is, if I was willing to cooperate. Considering how you and your mortal minions at the police department royally screwed up my life without recourse, I figured it was probably the best job offer I could expect. And, I should add, I'm finding out that I really enjoy what I'm doing now."

The last sentence chilled Nick's blood as he noted the ominous unspoken message. "I'm sorry about the arrest," he attempted to placate. "The circumstantial evidence did point at you."

"Nick, you're a vampire who can sense when a person is lying to you. You allowed your objectivity to be overshadowed by your fears of the vampire hunters of your past. If you kept your wits about you instead of being sucked into this self-pity and self-loathing, you would have realized that I was telling you the truth!... As I was saying, I was in the neighborhood so I thought I'd drop on by and see how you're doing."

"I'm doing as well as expected," he muttered as he wasn't sure what he wanted to tell the Enforcer.

"I heard about the drug bust. Tough luck."

"How--"

"It's my business to know, Nick. Oh, and a word of warning. I'd be really careful if I were you! Your preference in mingling with mortals places you at risk of breaking the Code. Ontario is part of my territory now, and I take my job very seriously. Understand?"

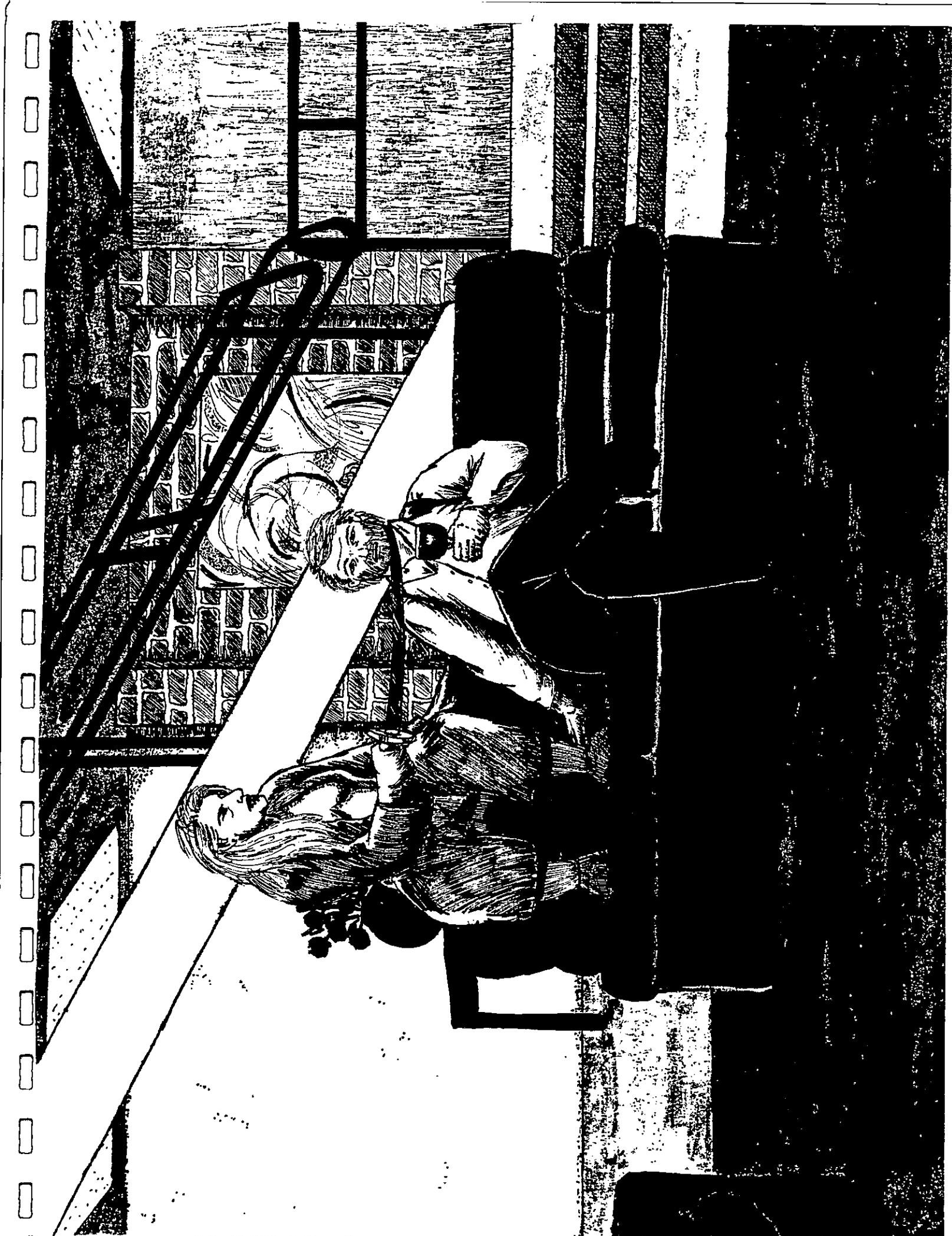
He swallowed uncomfortably, damning himself for having been instrumental for this woman to now become his watchdog. "Yes, I understand."

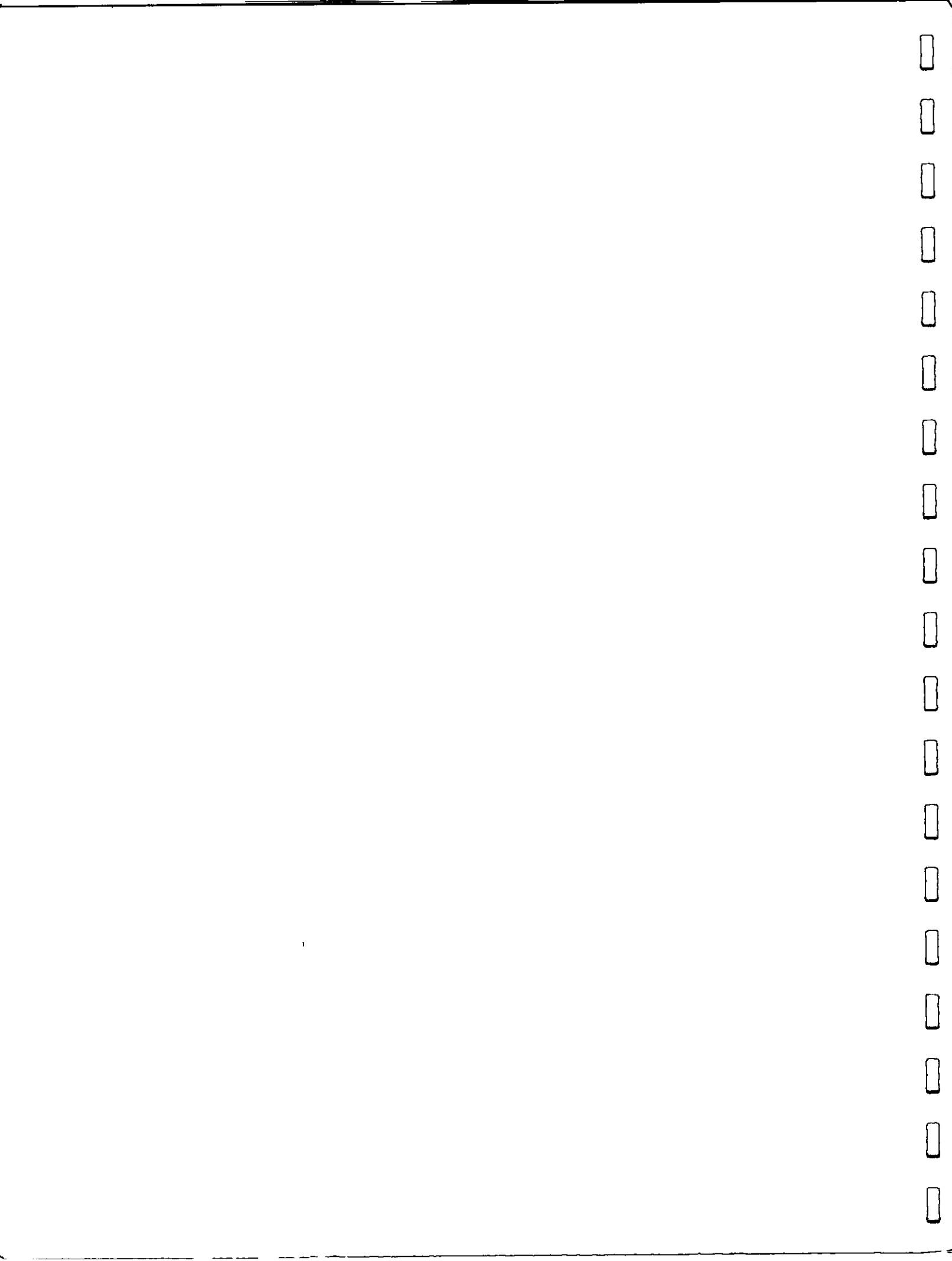
"Good. If you don't mind, I'll be leaving now. Give my regards to Janette the next time you see her."

Nick watched her depart, catching a glimpse of the cursed Japanese sword at her side, the dark metal glinting coldly under the artificial light. From what he could perceive, Kei was very contented to continue its role as a vampire killer.

Kei in the hands of a female Enforcer.

His mind slipped back into the past to a dank cavern carved in the native rock beneath an old Buddist temple where a young woman, devastated by the loss of her family, wrecked her vengeance on him. Without ceremony, Akako had then





released her hold on her sister, and with stoic finality, decapitated Umeko as silver streams of tears streaked down her face. She then had faced Nicholas, still entrapped until the fires died down.

"The ceremony is broken; you will not be free from your curse. Though I can kill you now and end your miserable existence, I will not. My curse is that you shall continue to live, never finding that which you seek, remembering all the lives you have destroyed, never to be free until I say so."

And her prophecy still held true to this day.

